A Fenton Wrapped In A Mystery (Inside an Enigma)
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A Fenton Wrapped In A Mystery (Inside an Enigma)

by ZombieMerlin

Summary

"Shh!"

In Lancer's peripheral vision, he sees Justine glancing around before her gaze rests on Lancer himself. He'd been staring at the legal pad in front of him unseeingly as he'd listened. He quickly writes out some gibberish on the pad, realizing his pen had stilled. Their voices drop down to whispers after that.

Hmm. Daniel makes videos of some sort? They're available for his classmates to see, and he talks to ghosts in them. Lancer never would have imagined the latter, considering how the boy is always one of the first to leave the scene of a ghost attack. Oh, well. At the very least, Lancer is glad his student has a hobby.

In which the entire student body of Casper High knows Danny's secret and has collectively agreed to keep it for him, and Lancer is baffled at Danny's sudden rise in popularity. Lancer slowly comes to realize there's a lot he doesn't know about Daniel Fenton... and then, eventually, it all makes sense. Sort of.

Featuring Confused!Mr.Lancer and NotADick!Mr.Lancer in 25-ish short chapters. Inadvertently goes through a bit of a tone shift, but ends on a happy note.

Notes

Hello, hello! This fic is entirely from Mr. Lancer's POV, because why not? Later, it gets more serious, but that's not for a dozen or so chapters, so... enjoy!

This first chapter takes place immediately after the events of Streaming 'The Truth', so I'd recommend reading that and the few fics before it first. Or you can just jump right into this. I don't control you.

Some chapters will be longer than others, but for the most part they're pretty short. I think this is one of the shortest ones? I dunno, we'll see.

Great Expectations

Chapter Notes

EDIT 7/20/2020: Made some minor edits.

Call of The Wild, what is that racket? Edward Lancer was in his classroom, waiting for the rest of his class to trickle in before the bell, when the cheering started outside. The students in his room that have already arrived sit up as well. A few of them exchange glances before leaving the room in obvious curiosity.

He should probably go investigate. He stands from his desk and pokes his head out of his classroom. Students line the halls, clapping, cheering, and hollering... and walking down the middle of the hallway are Daniel Fenton, Samantha Manson, and Tucker Foley.

Daniel looks almost afraid at the noise, face red and shoulders hunched by his ears as he stares holes into the ground. Tucker, beaming, slings an arm around his friend's shoulders and whispers something into his ear. Daniel stops walking, looks at his friend, before looking around.

"Go Danny!" one student shouts.

"Fenton's the best!" exclaims another.

"Thank you for everything!"

They're cheering... *for* Daniel?

The boy seems to come to the same realization. His shoulders relax, and an awed half-smile forms on his face as he looks around at the gathered crowd. He even lifts up a hand to wave shyly as the three friends continue towards Lancer's classroom. Samantha rolls her eyes, mouth moving to probably make some snarky comment, but there's a smile on her lips as well.

Lancer wants to be happy for his student, but he's not sure what this means. Does everyone like Daniel all of a sudden? How long will this go on for? What if this is some elaborate prank?

"*Great Expectations,* what was all that about?" Mr. Lancer asks the three friends as they walk into his classroom.

Daniel gives a half-shrug in lieu of an answer, still grinning.

"People are just finally realizing how awesome Danny is, Mr. Lancer," Tucker says instead, patting his friend on the shoulder. Sam snorts and mutters something else under her breath. Her friends laugh. Lancer, still baffled, merely watches as the rest of his class trickles in.

Then the bell rings, and he shakes his head. Teenagers.

It's Not Eavesdropping If They're Talking Loudly

Chapter Notes

Takes place after "Sleepover At No Mercy Hospital! (Also: Concussions Suck)".

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Tell me you saw the video last night," says the recognizably loud voice of Justine O'Hare.

"Fenton's video? I totally forgot," her friend Spencer Kellin responds at a more reasonable volume, closing his book.

"He spent the night alone at No Mercy."

"What?! And he's still breathing?"

"Yeah, it was *so* creepy. He ran into, uh. I mean... it may or may not be a new ghost."

"'May or may not be?'"

"Yeah, I don't really know? It, sorry, *'Kelton'* wasn't glowing like ghosts normally do, so..."

"Hmm. Weird."

"Yeah. I think he and Fenton are friends now? It was kinda cute. I wish he'd do more videos where he's just interacting with ghosts or talking to them or something."

"I'm not sure about that. With his parkour stuff, he'd probably just be better off making a separate channel for—"

"Shh!"

In Lancer's peripheral vision, he sees Justine glancing around before her gaze rests on Lancer himself. He'd been staring at the legal pad in front of him unseeingly as he'd listened. He quickly writes out some gibberish on the pad, realizing his pen had stilled.

Their voices drop down to whispers after that.

Hmm. Daniel makes videos of some sort? They're available for his classmates to see, and he talks to ghosts in them. Lancer never would have imagined the latter, considering how the boy is always one of the first to leave the scene of a ghost attack. Oh, well. At the very least, Lancer is glad his student has a hobby.

Between the "bathroom breaks," the bruises, and the bullying, Lancer often worries about Daniel. He wishes he could do more to help the boy, but with an administration willing to turn a blind eye to bullying and Fenton's denial of any physical abuse happening inside or outside of school, Lancer finds himself at a loss for what to do.

It's nice that Daniel seems to have found something other students respect him for as opposed to making fun of him for it. Perhaps the videos are even the reason for his sudden rise in popularity.

Lancer's happy for his student, but he also recognizes the fickleness of fame within the halls of Casper High.

How long is this going to last?

Chapter End Notes

Considering the volume of Justine's speaking voice, Lancer finds it a bit ironic that she's the one doing the shushing.

Kids These Days With Their Cell Phones and Their Parkour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lancer overhears more about these "videos" as the week progresses. While their subjects seem to vary, most of them apparently involve Daniel doing some sort of dangerous gymnastics, which... okay. That's a little concerning. Lancer hadn't realized the boy was actively putting himself in danger, but that seems to be what's happening.

This is why he finds himself on ViewTube one day, fingers hovering over his keyboard. It feels... wrong somehow, to be looking up his student. Despite the fact that the videos are public and free to view, Lancer recognizes that he's likely not the target audience.

It's for his student's safety. He repeats this to himself as he types "*danny fenton"* into the search bar.

Daniel's channel is the first result that comes up. The round little image next to his name features him squatting in front of a backdrop of trees, grinning madly at the camera. A few clicks later, and Lancer is watching "POV Run of Downtown Amity Park".

It doesn't seem too spectacular at first. Daniel is holding the camera towards himself, face framed by a moonlit sky. He speaks briefly about how long he's wanted to do an "urban run," whatever that means, and warns his viewers not to try what he's about to do. That's not concerning at all.

The camera shifts as it's attached to his head somehow, revealing that he's standing on a rooftop somewhere in the more urban area of Amity Park. Lancer spots the tip of the Central Park fountain in the background and recognizes Daniel's location in downtown Amity Park. This doesn't make sense, though. In order for him to have this view, he'd have to be standing on top of an *apartment complex.* What could he possibly be doing up here?

Daniel takes a few steps back. Lancer tenses, suddenly deathly afraid. He's not about to witness... there's no possible way...

Daniel runs forwards and *jumps.*

Grapes of Wrath! Lancer gapes as the boy leaps over the gap between the two buildings, landing in a roll and popping back up as he continues running. He frontflips off of ledges, scales walls that should reasonably *not* have any hand or footholds, and runs over the top of thick fence posts with feet of nothing but empty air between them.

Lancer hadn't realized he was holding his breath in tense anticipation until he absolutely had to release it. He pauses the video and sits back in his chair. On the screen, Danny's feet are frozen in mid-air, poised to land on top of a wall that can't be more than six inches wide. Lancer is torn. On one hand, the boy is incredibly physically capable, more so than anyone would think just looking at him. There are several instances where he'd pulled his weight over a wall with nothing but his fingertips, or leaped over a gap that looked impossible to clear. On the other hand, the entire video is riddled with moments where he could have fallen and gotten seriously injured or worse.

This is what it takes for Daniel to get approval? Lancer can't let this go on, can he? He feels like he should say something, but is this in his jurisdiction as a teacher? Daniel is by no means obligated to heed any of Lancer's concerns for his safety and seems to enjoy what he's doing. He likely would

just shrug off his teacher's concern. Plus, Lancer has seen Daniel smile more and talk to more people in this past week than he has this entire school year. Can Lancer really take that away from him?

He scrolls down to the comments.

Showing (3) out of (42) comments on 'POV Run of Downtown Amity Park'

guest1192: :O

jas000n: LMAO that dog at 04:03 is a whole mood

WaterIsSoWet: okay, okay, I got it. The woods next to Lake Eerie are supposedly haunted. I know that doesn't mean a lot in this town, buuuuuut have you ever messed around with a Ouija board??

The comments are filled with awed reactions and more dares. Only one commenter, who can only be Ms. Samantha Manson judging by the name, expresses any semblance of disapproval. That's comforting, at least. Somewhat.

Chapter End Notes

If *this* is what it takes to be popular nowadays, then Lancer's glad he's not a teenager anymore.

(This chapter doesn't have an associated video fic, so you're not missing anything.)

(ALSO if you have a vignette you wanna see... tell me?? Please?? The number of planned chapters for this fic just rose from 16 to 22 because of a suggestion someone made that set off a chain of events for me. Most of these chapters aren't necessarily connected, so I'm totally down for shifting some around and adding in new ideas. AnimationAdventures suggested a thing that I'm definitely going to be using, and so did some people on a couple of the other fics in this series. You got an idea? Share in a comment!)

EDIT 7/20/20: Made some minor grammatical fixes.

In Which Gray Momentarily Sees Red

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lancer is well aware of the oddly strict self-imposed (and, admittedly, teacher/staff-reinforced) social hierarchy that the students form for themselves. He is also well aware that Daniel Fenton has historically been very nearly at the bottom of that hierarchy. So, when he sees the crowd of students with young Mr. Fenton in the middle of it, Mr. Lancer assumes that Dash is also in the circle and that things need to be broken up. Bullying is a commonplace event that most tend to ignore, but crowds only form when something Big is happening. Even with Daniel's new popularity, there's no way that *everyone* loves him.

Mr. Lancer pushes his way to the front, ready with detention slips. The top of the boy's mop of black hair disappears from sight— presumably meaning he's on the ground. Mr. Lancer sighs. Despite the new widespread peer approval, high school will likely remain a traumatic blight on this child's life.

When Mr. Lancer gets through, though, it's not Dash Baxter he sees standing over Daniel... it's Valerie Gray. She opens and closes the fist she'd likely struck him with, an unreadable stoicism on her face.

"That's for making my life ten times more confusing than it already was," she says, almost too quiet for Lancer to hear. The volume of her voice is conversational, but the jeering of the students around them makes it hard to discern the words being spoken.

"That's fair," Danny concedes, rubbing his jaw where Valerie had hit him. "Are you... still going to try to kill me?" he adds, tone joking.

"Honestly?" Valerie says. "I don't know."

Students start slinking away upon noticing Lancer's presence. Meanwhile, Lancer stands there, stunned. He'd assumed Daniel's question was a joke, but the gravity with which Valerie had answered him back is startling. His question may have been rhetorical to some extent. Her answer didn't feel the same. Teenagers these days are always making exaggerated claims about craving death and things like that, but she'd said it so *seriously.* There's no way she's actually tried to murder him, though. That's ridiculous. So what in the world could she be alluding to?

Valerie has never shown any tendency toward violence. He's seen plenty of rejected A-listers in his time as a teacher here. Valerie had seemed to be handling her fall from grace from last year quite exceptionally. The snubs from her old "friends" seemed to stop bothering her pretty quickly, and she'd readily made new acquaintances. That couldn't have incited this. And, while she and Daniel had seemed to be in a romantic relationship for a time, the break-up had appeared to be mutual. The two students still got along well-enough afterwards, from what Mr. Lancer had observed.

So... what happened?

As if the situation couldn't get any odder, Valerie reached a hand down to help Daniel stand.

"I don't know how to feel about you yet," she says, "but I'm keeping my eye on you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way!" Fenton chirps, smiling despite the angry red mark on his jaw.

Ms. Gray turns to Mr. Lancer calmly. "When do I have to show up for detention, Mr. Lancer?" she asks, dabbing at the knuckles of her hand with a tissue Lancer hadn't noticed her pull out.

"...what?" Mr. Lancer asks.

"Well, I'm not an A-lister anymore, which means I'm actually going to get in trouble for hitting someone, and that someone else won't get punished as a scapegoat. *Right?*"

She raises an eyebrow, almost as if she's daring him not to do anything.

"I... right," Mr. Lancer says awkwardly. He avoids eye contact by sloppily filling out the detention slip and tearing it off, feeling silly for being so intimidated by her accusing gaze and hating how right she is about the discipline of A-Listers. "Why did you hit Mr. Fenton, Ms. Gray?"

"He lied to me about something really important. And he's been avoiding me like a *child* because he doesn't want to talk about it," she responds simply, glancing at the slip before stuffing into her bag.

"Technically, I didn't lie to you," Daniel says. His shoulders rise defensively under the heat of her glare. He hadn't even bothered to deny avoiding her.

"A lie by omission is still a *lie,"* she says through gritted teeth.

Clearly not valuing his life, Daniel continues speaking. "I mean, it also wasn't safe for me to tell you the truth."

Wait. It wasn't *safe?* Safe for who? What had these two been doing?

...oh. Um. Oh, dear. Had they...?

Well, it doesn't really fit with what they're saying, but Lancer should probably make sure...

"Do you want another one, Fenton?" she asks, raising her fist again as Lancer tries to figure out how to bring up the topic without totally embarrassing all three of them.

"I'm good. I'm so good. Totally good," Daniel babbles, backing away from Valerie's threat.

She turns back to Mr. Lancer. "May I go now, sir?"

Lancer hesitates. Maybe it's not what he thinks it is. He asks, "What did he lie about?"

Daniel's eyes are wide, and he glances back and forth between Valerie and Lancer like he's afraid of what Valerie will say. Valerie examines her bruised knuckles for a long moment before sighing.

"Just... the kind of person he is. And he also found out something about me that I didn't want anyone else knowing. I guess that last part might not have been his fault, but... I don't know. I... I don't feel comfortable sharing more than that because it's not entirely my story to share," she finally answers. Daniel exhales hard enough to briefly blow his bangs out of his face, clearly relieved at her vague answer.

Well. Clearly there's a story there, but... that elucidated absolutely nothing. *Romeo and Juliet,* this will not be fun.

Lancer coughs into his fist, clearing his throat and buying time for himself to try and organize his thoughts. The gathered crowd has been dispersed since he wrote the slip, but as an extra precaution,

he lowers his voice.

"Well. That's fine, then. I know I can't... I can't control what choices you decide to make, ah... with each other, but— I at least implore you to be safe, and, and consider the law—"

Valerie's admirable composure immediately disintegrates. "Mr. Lancer, you— you think we— oh, *no,* wait, it's not like—"

"What?" Danny's a little slower on the uptake, but his face reddens impressively when he catches on. "Wait. Oh. *Oh.* I can see how you— jeez, Mr. Lancer, we've never— we never—"

"It's nothing *sexual*!" Valerie hisses desperately, glancing around in the hallway for witnesses. Daniel shakes his head, babbling negatory sentence fragments and pointing between himself and Valerie.

Alright, then. So maybe it's not what Lancer thought. That's a relief, at least. Lancer waits for Daniel to trail off into an awkward silence.

"I just wanted to make sure," Lancer says. The two teens nod, refusing to look at him or at each other.

Silence.

"Do you need to go to the nurse's office, Mr. Fenton?" Lancer asks, desperate to change the subject.

"No, sir, this is nothing," Fenton responds, gingerly prodding his face and grimacing. Lancer's heart sinks at the reminder that his student is used to being physically injured by others but doesn't say as much aloud.

Valerie elbows him almost discreetly enough for Lancer not to notice, disguising the motion as her adjusting her bag. "But you still need ice for it, right?"

"Well, not real— I mean, *yes.* Yes. Ice is, uh, good. Ice is definitely something I need."

"Can we still go to the nurse to get ice for his face, Mr. Lancer?" Valerie asks quietly, still subdued in her embarrassment.

Lancer recognizes the obvious escape attempt, because getting ice does not require two people, but he also figures the two students seem to have a lot they need to work out. Perhaps the conversation will be good for them. Lancer nods his assent and writes them a pass.

The two of them walk off in a direction that is most definitely not towards the nurse's office. Right as they're turning the corner out of Lancer's sight, Valerie starts whispering furiously to the boy. He rubs the back of his neck, his characteristic nervous motion, and that's the last Lancer sees before they disappear.

Chapter End Notes

They could have at least pretended to go to the nurse's office.

Edit: (also lol I accidentally posted this chapter five days early... whoops. That's the

last time I save drafts in AO3.)

Another edit: While I'm here... got any ideas for pranks Danny can play on a certain crazed fruit loop? :)

EDIT 7/20/2020: Made some minor edits.

OPERATION: HFLPF

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Lancer has a bad habit of leaving his classroom door unlocked.

It's not like it has ever caused him any trouble in the past. It's just that teachers are supposed to lock their classrooms when they leave the school. He has never had any incidents or anything with people in his classroom, though, so forgetting to lock the door doesn't bother him that much. There are more pressing things to be worried about.

Still, when he sees the lights on in his classroom one morning about an hour before school officially starts, he can't help but think he might have pushed his luck for too long. Has it finally come back to bite him?

He peeks in through the door's window. The whiteboard at the front of the room is almost completely covered in dry-erase marker. The most legible are the two lists written in large letters, with topics such as "integrals," "cellular respiration," and "The Civil War" under the headings "WEAK AREAS" and "SEEMS OKAY." Various little phrases branch off of the list items underneath the former category, too small for Lancer to see from where he's standing.

Nathan Knight stands by the board, dry erase marker in hand. Lancer recognizes the other three students in the room as Nathan's friends, Heather Ito, Jason Chin, and Angelique Francis. Angelique is leaning her head against the other girl's shoulder, while Heather idly combs through Angelique's thick curls with her fingers. Jason, hunched over his laptop, reads something aloud to his friends, who are listening intently.

Lancer opens the door. The four students look up in surprise. Angelique sits up. Now that he's in the room, he can clearly read the large heading off to the side of the lists: "OPERATION: HFLPF."

"Operation: Hufflepuff?" he reads aloud, amused.

"Ha!" Jason says triumphantly, grinning. "*Told* y'all it's readable!"

"I suppose that settles that argument," Angelique concedes in her slow, soft drawl.

"I still think it's a stupid name," Heather grumbles.

"But Fenton's a Hufflepuff! People voted on it!" Jason says.

"So? 'Help Fenton, Like, Pass Fully,' is still the dumbest message ever," Heather protests. "Picking the acronym before knowing what the letters stand for is *objectively* stupid!"

"Jason won the coin toss, so pushing back against the name is pretty useless," Nathan says, despite his tone suggesting that he agrees with Heather.

"What exactly are you all doing?" Lancer asks curiously as he steps closer to the board. Schedules, calendar dates, grades, and more content headings litter every available square inch of whiteboard space. Nathan quickly erases something from the lower corner before Lancer can see it, which obviously is not suspicious at all. Lancer frowns but doesn't comment.

"We're, um, kinda planning tutoring sessions for Danny Fenton," Nathan explains.

"Really?" Lancer asks, touched at the concern for their fellow student. "What prompted this?"

"Well. We don't want him to fail," Angelique says.

"Yeah. He does so much for all of us, it's the least we can do," Jason adds. The other three students glare at him sharply, and his smile fades. "I... I mean. You know. Cause he's a nice guy. He does so much because he's a *really* nice guy. Like. Super nice." He bites his lip and stops talking quite abruptly, cutting off the flow of words out of his own mouth. The other three turn to Lancer and smile.

They're pretty obviously hiding something. Lancer thinks back to Justine and Spencer's behavior from a few days before, when they'd reached some taboo Daniel-related topic and dropped their voices into whispers. Another secret surrounding Fenton?

It may just be a coincidence. These are good kids, but Lancer recognizes his status as a teacher intrinsically puts up a confidentiality barrier between him and his students. They deserve their privacy, and just because they don't want to share something doesn't mean they're up to something that he should know about. It's probably nothing.

Probably.

Chapter End Notes

If only Lancer knew... "good kids" are just the kids that don't get caught.

Still taking Danny-pranks-Vlad ideas, as well as suggestions for chapters! What's some weird thing about Danny that Mr. Lancer may notice and not be able to explain? I feel like there's so much that I'm not thinking about.

EDIT 7/20/2020: Made some minor edits.

A Newly-Discovered "Bathroom Condition"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Lancer can tell when Daniel actually needs to go to the bathroom. After two and a half years of teaching the boy, he can differentiate between the genuine bathroom requests and the ones that are just an excuse for him to leave the room and not come back for twenty minutes or more.

The Genuine Bathroom Break requests tend to be casual, almost bored. Sometimes they're reluctant, a hesitance that suggests Daniel realizes the abnormality of how often he asks the question. He tends not to fully put his hand in the air, instead raising it just high enough that it catches Lancer's attention.

The Excuse Bathroom Break requests, on the other hand, are more urgent. They always seem to happen right as Daniel realizes something. He'll be working on an assignment, or taking notes from the lecture or something, and then all of a sudden he'll sit up.

Lancer's rarely sees the boy's face when this happens, usually catching the abrupt movement in his peripheral vision. Still, he's learned how to anticipate the hand that shoots as high into the air as the arm will reach, ramrod straight and fingers spread far apart. Sometimes, his other hand will cling desperately to the edge of the desk like it does today, as if it's the only thing tethering him to a seated position.

"Yes, Mr. Fenton?" Lancer asks.

"*MayIpleasegotothebathroom*?" Daniel asks in one breath.

Mr. Lancer scrutinizes his student for a moment. Daniel Fenton is not a slacker, contrary to what many of the other teachers seem to think. Lancer knows what slackers look like, and the boy does not fit the bill. Sure, he’s occasionally a trouble-maker. Lancer can’t ever forget the time Daniel locked him in a closet to skip detention for Circus Gothica, but that was a weird week for everyone.

Daniel is a bright student. His contributions to discussions are always exceptional when he actually puts the work into it. While much of his essay writing is repetitive fluff when he hasn't done the research, it's incredibly well-written fluff. Yet, every so often, something happens somewhere else that Daniel decides takes priority over his schooling.

Lancer has always figured it was best to let the boy go deal with whatever it is, reasoning that it must be truly important enough to leave class for. But today, Lancer wonders what would happen if he said,

"No."

Daniel blinks, the hand falling back to his desk. "What?"

"No. You may not go to the restroom. There are ten minutes of class left. Surely you can wait that long?"

The boy's eyes shift to the classroom window before focusing back on his teacher. He grips his desk with both hands.

"I really need to go, though."

"Ten minutes, Daniel. Nine, now. It'll be over before you know it."

Daniel presses his lips together. He steals another glance out the window and coughs into his fist. Lancer glances out the window as well. There's nothing but a sunny fall day. What is out there that is so important right now?

Nathan raises his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Knight?"

"I know this is going to sound weird, but... could you please let Danny go to the bathroom, sir?"

Lancer blinks. Um. What?

"It's just that he, uh, he has a condition," Nathan continues, seeming nervous at his teacher's lack of an answer. "A condition where he, um... has to go to the bathroom a lot?"

Lancer raises an eyebrow at the unconvincing lie. "Well, why couldn't Mr. Fenton tell me about this condition himself?" he says, playing along as his eyes slide back to the student in question. Danny shrinks in his seat. He laughs sheepishly and rubs the back of his neck as his face reddens. He shoots another quick glance out the window.

"It's kind of embarrassing, Mr. Lancer," another voice pops up. Ms. Manson. Unsurprising that she's chiming in. "IBS isn't something you go around publicly announcing."

"It didn't have to be public," Lancer points out. "He could have approached me outside of class."

"Sir, would *you* wanna tell your teacher that you have a *bathroom condition?"* Kwan Kiew interjects, which... what? An A-Lister? Defending Daniel Fenton? Without malice? Granted, Kwan is one of the kinder football players, but... not to this degree. Not enough to stick up for someone like Daniel, even with Daniel's new popularity.

"Well, no—" Mr. Lancer starts, still slightly thrown by Kwan's input.

"Then could ya leddim go?" a lazy drawl says from the back of the room. "Since you know now."

"Yeah, I think it's only fair," says another student.

"You could probably get sued if he pees his pants," another voice adds. "D'ya wanna get sued, Mr. Lancer?"

What in *The Awakening* is happening? Other students chime in with similar comments, and Mr. Lancer remembers with a start that Fenton's Excuse Bathroom Breaks typically cause some sort of snickering in the room. Today? That didn't happen. The entire class is staring at their teacher expectantly. There are no giggles hidden behind hands, no silent grins, no insults coughed into fists. This isn't a giant joke at Fenton's expense, but... it also doesn't seem like a coordinated prank on Lancer himself.

Nathan had quite blatantly and unconvincingly lied to him, but the entire class is backing him up on it and trying to convince Lancer to let Daniel go to the bathroom. It's bizarre. It makes no sense. And yet, Lancer finds himself crumbling under the judging stares of all twenty teenagers in the room.

"Fine! Go," Mr. Lancer relents, waving a hand dismissively and pretending his class's oddly unified behavior has had no impact on him other than swaying his decision.

"Thankyou, thankyou, *thankyou!"* Daniel nearly topples his chair over in his attempts to get out the door. There's another, glaring absence of laughter at the sight of him nearly face-planting.

He doesn't come back to class.

Chapter End Notes

IBS is a serious condition, but Lancer's pretty sure Fenton doesn't have it. Oh, well.

I'm good on pranks for now. Thanks to everyone that suggested something (especially AnimationAdventures for the idea of a prank chapter at all).

EDIT 7/20/2020: Made some minor edits.

Prank You Very Much

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel's Viewtube-induced popularity finally seems to be waning over the next couple of weeks. Despite this, the oddly-positive treatment of him (and by extension his friends) continues. People aren't cheering when he walks into the school anymore, but they do offer cheerful greetings or startle him with random high-fives when he passes by. Even as the attention on him abates, Daniel still doesn't seem to be used to people other than his friends talking to him willingly.

Today, the three students walk side-by-side down the hallway. They chat amicably as they head towards their first class, and they're the picture of friendship. Seeing them suddenly reminds Lancer of his friends on the cheerleading squad back when he was a student. Goodness the stupid things he and the girls would get up to around town after practice... He misses that. He makes a mental note to call some of them after school.

A football player steps into the trio's path. Lancer recognizes him as Dale Pruitt, linebacker for the team. Lancer straightens in anticipation of a confrontation and, by the way they're tensing, the three friends are doing the same.

Dale says something indiscernible from Lancer's position. Daniel responds, hesitant. Dale holds out a hand. Daniel stares at it for a moment, seeming uncertain until Samantha elbows him. Daniel reaches out a hand to take Dale's. The larger boy tugs him into a hug, and Daniel stiffens. Lancer sees Dale's lips move, saying something quietly. Danny's shoulders relax marginally. He awkwardly pats Dale on the back. Dale breaks the hug and turns to Samantha and Tucker. He fist-bumps the both of them, not even seeming put-out by Tucker's overly enthusiastic response, before turning and walking off. Daniel frowns at his retreating back.

It's the first time Lancer has seen Dale since he'd taken a day off from school about a week ago. Lancer doesn't have the boy as a student, but the Pruitt family had ended up on the news recently when Dale's younger sister had nearly drowned in the nearby Lake Eerie. Phantom had apparently appeared and fished the girl out of the water to fly her to the hospital. Daniel and his friends had also been on the scene for some reason, though Lancer can't recall how they fit into the story. On the news that evening, the girl's parents had tearfully thanked Phantom and the three teenagers for their actions. The students insisted it was all Phantom's doing.

It's a little odd how overblown Dale's reaction to Daniel was in comparison to the boy's friends. Lancer isn't really sure what to make of it, considering the supposedly minimal role Daniel and his friends had played in the girl's rescue, but perhaps there's more to the story than what was released on the news.

Then again... everything surrounding Daniel Fenton lately has been a "little odd." Admittedly, his grades have been improving with the help of his new tutors, and he seems happier. It isn't Lancer's business to try and prod at that. The problem is that he's *curious,* and the curiosity begs to be sated. Ghost attacks and pep rallys notwithstanding, there isn't really much that happens at this school that Lancer can ever get himself to be interested in.

Perhaps that's why he's so in tune with the fact that something about Daniel Fenton recently just doesn't add up. The rational part of him says this "mystery" is just the popularity of the boy's ViewTube channel. The annoying part that refuses to leave well enough alone says that something isn't making sense, and well... who ever listens to that rational voice in their head anyway?

Lancer glances at the clock as he steps into his classroom. It's still another twenty minutes before school starts. He pulls up Daniel's ViewTube channel and clicks the latest video.

"How many pranks can I pull on one person in 48 hours? ft. Mayor Masters"

Oh, boy. This should be good.

The video is exactly as the title promises. Daniel had spent the weekend with his parents at one of the many homes of Mayor Vlad Masters and decided to have some fun while he was there. While the adult Fentons make brief appearances, they apparently do nothing to stop Daniel's shenanigans.

It's amusing, but it also makes Lancer a little uneasy. The animosity between Daniel and the mayor... well. It's not *obvious.* It does just look like the man is annoyed at the pranks, and Daniel himself jokes and downplays any suggestion of malice or dislike in their relationship, but something about the way they interact throws up a red flag to Lancer. He also thinks it's strange that the boy would "forget to record" almost half of his successful pranks, considering the fact that they're the subject of the video, but that's probably nothing. Despite his brilliance, Daniel is a bit absent-minded sometimes.

Lancer scrolls down to the comments.

Showing (3) out of (38) comments on 'How many pranks can I pull on one person in 48 hours? ft. Mayor Masters'

jas000n: THE AIRHORN ASJFKFL;JKAL;FDJKS;LAF HE GOT SHOCKED BY HIS LIL TOY AND THEN AIRHORNED, LMAOOOO .but also did he like?? Hit you with a flamethrower or smth?? ?

WaterIsSoWet: Important question- how many houses does the mayor actually have? MOre important question - did anyone else pick up the super bad vibes from Masters? possibly MOST important question - WHAT WERE THE OTHER THREE PRANKS??!??!

NateOfTheKnight: I'd like to appreciate the GENIUS of "brownies" and "brown E's." It's so stupid, it's hilarious.

"Lil toy"? Oh, Mr. Masters had been working on something in his library. Lancer wonders briefly what it was, but he's mostly just grateful that someone else had noticed the tension between Daniel and Masters. There was also that slightly concerning moment when Daniel had supposedly entered Masters' room and came back with singe marks on his shirt. Lancer honestly can not come up with a reasonable explanation for that. He's just not going to think about it too hard.

Also... he has to concur with *NateOfTheKnight.* The "brownies" were genius.

Chapter End Notes

Lancer also wants to know what the other three pranks were.

—

Here's the link to the video Lancer watches. I know I asked for pranks in this fic, but they show up in that fic, lol. Aaaaand as always, if you think of something weird about Danny that Lancer may notice... lemme knowwwww!! :D

Edit 6/14/2020: Added Lancer reacting to the singe marks on Danny's shirt.

Edit 7/20/2020: Made some minor edits.

Sharpener Struggles and a Sort-Of Reveal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Fenton?" Kiersten Kieraston deadpans. She scoffs. "Yeah, no way. There's no way he's—"

"*Shh!"* her friend Dunya Rahal hisses, glancing around.

There's no way he's *what?* Since consciously recognizing the Daniel Fenton "mystery," Lancer's curiosity has grown into a beast demanding satiety.

"Fine. There's no way he's you-know-who," Kiersten amends, rolling her eyes. "Come on. They're literally two different people."

"You saw him in the video!"

"Videos can be edited. *Very* easily, I might add. Plus, they have completely different personalities."

"Do you act the same way around everyone?" Dunya shoots back. "Because I *definitely* don't act the same way around my parents as I do you. You don't think it's like that for him? I mean, you can literally see a difference just between how he is at school versus in his videos."

"Yeah, but... I mean, come on. *Look* at him. There's no muscle on that kid."

There's a pause and some shuffling. Lancer glances up to see the two girls have turned completely around in their seats to look at Daniel, who is across the room innocuously sharpening his pencil. He takes it out of the sharpener to examine it and flicks its tip, likely to test its strength. The tip breaks off. He stares at the newly-broken pencil, seeming profoundly disappointed, before putting it back into the sharpener.

"You only say that because he's always wearing baggy clothes," Dunya says when they turn back around. "Have you ever actually tried to see him lift anything? Because I saw him pick up Manson and Foley at the same time once."

"Okay, and?"

"What do you mean *'and'?* That's TWO people!"

"And we are talking about the same kid that can barely do a sit-up, right?"

"Well, yeah, but. I dunno. That's probably just to throw people off."

"Right."

"Come on, look at his *arms!"*

The two girls turn around again. The arms in question are actually a bit defined, though nowhere near the level of some of the football players. Daniel himself is peering into the electric pencil sharpener. The pencil in his other hand is broken again, which probably means there's a pencil tip stuck inside the machine. He turns the sharpener upside down. The tray holding the shavings falls out of the little device, spilling the contents onto the ground and all over Daniel's front. The boy once again stares for a long moment, looking for all the world like he's contemplating his desire to be alive. Lancer is actually a little concerned, but Daniel eventually sighs and moves towards the

broom closet in the corner of the room.

Lancer scrawls down a note to put in an order for a new electric pencil sharpener. That one has been giving people problems.

In other news, however... Daniel's identity is being debated somehow? After a moment's hesitation, Lancer quickly scribbles *"may or may not be 'you-know-who'"* underneath the reminder about the sharpener. He'll add it to the list later.

Lancer stands from his desk and decides to walk around the classroom to stretch his legs. It's nearly the end of class, and most of the students have submitted the short writing assignment for the class period and are chatting idly until the bell rings. He checks in on some of those who are still working, offering help and commentary. His idle stroll eventually takes him to where Kiersten and Dunya are still having their back-and-forth.

"May I ask what you two are arguing about?" Lancer impulsively asks.

Mentally, he kicks himself, immediately regretting his intervention. What was he thinking? Dunya looks at him like a deer in headlights, before fidgeting nervously with the end of her hijab and mumbling something without making eye contact.

"It's nothing, Mr. Lancer," Kiersten says. "We're just talking about a ViewTube channel. I do have a question for *you,* though."

The subject change is obvious, but he has no real justified reason to press it. Drat.

"And what would that question be?" Lancer asks.

"Is water wet? Because *this one*—" She gestures at Dunya. "—seems to think it is. But it totally isn't!"

Lancer blinks. Of course water is wet, it's *water*... or maybe it isn't.

Hmm.

Dunya snorts, biting her lip to hide a smile as her fidgeting intensifies. "Water is SO wet."

"It is *not!"*

Bewildered and uncertain, Lancer watches as the two girls dissolve into another round of arguing. Judging from the conversation, it seems like an argument they've had several times before. Kiersten seems to take it much more seriously than Dunya, leaving Lancer with the sneaking suspicion that Dunya is merely arguing for the sake of it rather than any actual belief in her position. He leaves them to their bickering and continues his rounds around the classroom.

Is water wet?

Chapter End Notes

> Lancer's now consumed by this question. *Is* water wet? He eventually decides that no, it's not. Danny's just having a bad day in the background.

Yes, Dunya is WaterIsSoWet. :) Mini-mystery solved! Kind of anti-climatic, not gonna lie, but I'm fond of her so whatever.

This is a short chapter. The next one will be MUCH longer, because a Big Thing happens. :)

Thanks to everyone that has been commenting ideas for things that Lancer can notice! Please keep them coming. Even if I don't end up using them, I like thinking about things that are normalized by Danny's POV in the show but that are actually really weird to outside observers.

I have a lab report to submit in about an hour and I haven't started, so... I'm gonna go do that. Thanks for reading!

EDIT 8/8/2020: Made some minor edits.

The Pocket Master

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Good *afternoon,* Casper High School!"

Exactly four out of the several hundred students crammed onto the gym bleachers call back a response to Principal Ishiyama's attempt at a rallying greeting. She looks mostly unbothered, but Lancer can see her nails digging into the podium in repressed annoyance. She continues.

"This morning, we have a very important guest coming to talk to us about..."

Lancer checks his watch, only half paying attention. He's never been very fond of school assemblies. With the exception of pep rallies, assemblies tend to be boring affairs that no one involved wants to be a part of. The students would rather be anywhere else, and Principal Ishiyama despises speaking in front of an uncaring crowd.

The teachers, at least, have a little freedom surrounding their attendance.

Since the entire school can fit into the gym, every assembly only requires a few teachers to be present to keep the students in line. All faculty are volun-told to chaperone at least two "assembly shifts" during the school year, but the administration doesn't bother checking whether or not teachers are actually present for the exact shifts they sign up for. The result? A hidden black market of shifts being traded, bartered, and haggled for various items and services. Lancer's strategy is always to sign up for the first two assemblies of the school year, and then to fill other teachers' shifts in exchange for books or coffee vouchers. He hates owing people, but he *loves* free literature and caffeine.

On paper, Mrs. Focutta is posted by the door to make sure students don't attempt to sneak out of the gym. In reality, she owes Mr. Lancer the fifth edition of *Pendragon* for standing in the doorway in her stead while she goes grocery shopping.

A spattering of unenthusiastic applause catches Lancer's attention, and he looks up to see none other Mayor Vlad Masters walking out onto the makeshift stage in the middle of the gym. Wow. Lancer didn't think the man was the type to deign to speak in a dinky gym full of uninterested teenagers. Masters has a couple of large boxes sitting on the stage with him, which likely means something is going to be distributed to students. Some of the teachers present have bets on what's in them. Lancer strategically chose not to participate, but it's probably some sort of pamphlet that half the students are going to lose before the end of the day.

Lancer had never really noticed the mayor's PR face prior to watching Daniel's prank video, but the difference between it and his neutral one is incredibly apparent. In Daniel's video, the man's face was almost completely expressionless when he believed himself alone. In comparison, while his public smile seems like it's supposed to be welcoming and friendly, it just looks... unnatural. Forced. Uncomfortable.

Lancer has no real reason to dislike the man, but something in him abruptly decides that he's not a fan of the mayor of Amity Park.

Mayor Masters takes out a briefcase from one of the boxes and removes some papers from it. In the process, a small object that looks suspiciously like a Froot Loop falls to the ground. There are

snickers in the crowd. Masters pauses for a brief moment before moving on like it hadn't happened. The PR smile looks a bit more strained now.

"Hello, Casper High School. I know you all have important things to do, so I will keep this short. I have gifts for you all."

Lancer scans the crowd, keeping an eye out for trouble. He glares at a couple of football players who aren't even bothering to *try* to be quiet. One of them eventually notices and elbows his friend harshly before jerking his head in Lancer's direction. The other one sobers quickly, and they avoid their teacher's gaze.

Daniel Fenton and his friends sit in the second row from the front, about ten yards away from Lancer. They're not acting wrongly, so his eyes almost pass over them, but he pauses at the look on Daniel's face. Unlike the detached disinterest that characterizes many of his peers, he, Samantha, and Tucker are sitting upright and watching the mayor with rapt, wary attention. Tucker is visibly concerned and gnaws at his lip. Samantha and Daniel squint at Masters like the man personally offended them. What in the world could have caused that?

"...and so, I thought I would provide you all with a commodity that you all deserve: your very own *ghost weapons!"*

What?! Lancer exchanges an incredulous glance with a nearby Mr. Powell, who seems just as baffled. Putting weapons in the hands of *children?* In what way is that a good idea at all?!

Gasps and whispers break out among the students, and Lancer finds his gaze once again drawn to Daniel. Many students around him are glancing in his direction, likely due to his parents' involvement with anti-ghost technology. The boy himself drags a hand down the long-suffering expression on his face. This is apparently not a fun subject for him.

"Yes, I know, I know," Mr. Masters says. "I know, especially, that you teachers out there are probably concerned. But there's nothing to worry about! I'll demonstrate with the fine young man that inspired this idea: Daniel James Fenton, where are you?"

The grin on Masters' face can only be described as shark-like. Lancer almost doesn't want Daniel to go up there. The people around Daniel are openly staring at him now. He glares at the ceiling, his mouth clearly forming the question, *"Why?"* He stands like a man on his way to execution. Samantha grabs his wrist and shakes her head, and Tucker stands to bar him from leaving. Daniel shrugs them off with a small, reassuring smile. The smile drops off his face as soon as he turns away from them.

Is... is Daniel in danger?

Lancer takes an involuntary step forward before catching himself. No. That doesn't make sense. The thought is as fleeting as it is irrational. Even if Mayor Masters and Daniel don't like each other, the mayor would never intentionally harm the boy, despite public opinion after the man blew up a car that Daniel happened to be in. Especially not with an audience of hundreds of people. Lancer is letting his imagination get away from him. He knows this, but he still feels uneasy. How was it that the one commenter said it? "Bad vibes."

This is probably some silly revenge for the prank video. Lancer doesn't approve of stooping as low as attempting to embarrass the boy in front of the entire school, but Daniel *did* post the prank video online where anyone could see it, so... maybe it's fair? The argument seems kinda weak, but he's probably getting ahead of himself again. It is totally normal for pranks to result in revenge-pranks by the original victim. He shouldn't be assuming anything inherently malicious about this situation.

Daniel briefly glares at Vlad when he gets on stage before schooling his expression into careful blankness upon facing the crowd.

"Hello, *Little Badger*!" Mr. Masters chirps. The glee in the man's voice is unrestrained. The nickname is likely another source of ire for Daniel, then. The boy, for what it's worth, doesn't visibly react.

"Hi, Mr. Masters," Daniel responds neutrally. The microphone doesn't pick up his voice since he's a few feet away from it, but Lancer can just barely hear what he's saying. "Tell me again how I inspired you? Because I *somehow* can't seem to recall doing anything of the sort, other than... visiting your house..."

Understanding dawns on Daniel's expression, and his shoulders slump slightly. "Ah. When I visited your house."

"Yes, when you *visited.* I'll share with the class," Masters says into the microphone. "See, a little while ago, I invited Daniel's parents to work with me on a little... project. I'd originally planned to keep the project personal, but Daniel tagged along with his parents that weekend and his... *antics* got me thinking: what if I shared this new creation with people his age? Thus, the Pocket Master was born."

Alright. "Antics." This is definitely in response to the pranks. But revenge or whatever story Lancer's imagination is running away with is probably nothing more than inviting the boy up on stage and using his full name and an annoying nickname. That's it. Right?

"Now. I'm going to demonstrate that this device has *no* capacity to harm humans. Daniel, step closer." Masters reaches into one of the boxes. His expression screws unpleasantly as he tosses out a couple more Froot Loops, which Lancer finds endlessly amusing. The mayor retrieves a small, silver cylinder. It seems to have a small dial on it, one that can slide up and down.

"Do I get a choice in this?" Daniel asks. The whispers in the crowd increase in volume.

"Don't be silly, Daniel," Masters says lightly. "It's perfectly safe."

The boy slowly walks closer, a frown on his face. Masters presses a button on the Pocket Master, and the end of it glows pink.

"Look, I've put it on the lowest setting if you're so concerned. You may feel a slight tingling sensation, however." He pokes Daniel in the side with it. The boy jumps, and a hand goes to his side, but he appears otherwise unharmed.

"See. Did that hurt?" Masters asks, removing the microphone from its stand and holding it in front of Daniel.

"No. It just *tingled,"* Daniel says lowly.

Sometimes the comments on Daniel's videos mention him being a little "creepy." Lancer would be lying if he said he hasn't noticed the same in the past two and a half years. Sometimes, the kid's just a little unsettling. He'll make a nonchalant comment about the finiteness of mortality or the "harsh ambivalence of fate", or he stares at something for just a little bit too long, or he'll wear an insincere smile that looks a little too much like plastic. He's still a kind, bright boy, but he just has those little moments sometimes.

The way anger now morphs Daniel's normally friendly expression into a mask of cold fury, though... Lancer has seen the boy stare resentfully at Dash's receding back, and he's glimpsed

briefly mutinous expressions on the rare occasion that Daniel receives a grade that he doesn't feel he deserves. None of that compares to the malice with which this sixteen-year-old now glares at Mayor Vlad Masters.

Lancer silently vows never to get on the boy's bad side.

"Perfect! Now, if I turn it up to a higher setting, nothing will happen to you because you're perfectly human and you have nothing to worry about. Right?"

Daniel takes a step backwards, the anger giving away to apprehension. "Um..."

"Ah. You're *afraid*. I understand. This device is perfectly safe for humans, but I understand if you're not feeling very courageous. Fear is a healthy motivator. I'll ask for another volunteer since you seem so apprehensive. Can we all applaud Daniel for his participation?"

That... that... *ugh.* Taking advantage of the boy's obvious discomfort for some silly revenge. Lancer now has a concrete reason to dislike the man. The crowd reacts with scattered applause, but none of it is very enthusiastic. The whispering continues despite Lancer's obligatory attempts to silence it via sharp looks.

Daniel wordlessly walks back to his seat. Masters turns to the crowd again.

"Any other volunteers?" Masters asks.

"Why don't you try it on *yourself,* Mayor Masters? Why are you so insistent on trying out this experiment on high schoolers? Did you test it on anyone before bringing it here?" Samantha Manson calls from the crowd. She's standing in her seat despite Tucker's fruitless attempts to tug her back down, and she discreetly pats Daniel on the shoulder as he sits on her other side.

The PR smile flickers and then recovers.

"Ms. Manson, the point of this demonstration is to show that it won't harm you or other humans so you can use it without fear."

"Then use it on yourself!" another voice chimes in. Samantha turns around to where Valerie Gray stands a few rows behind her. Some sort of silent acknowledgment passes between the two girls in the brief moment when they're looking at each other, and then they both turn their attention back to Masters.

Just like that day in class, other students start to speak out. Mr. Powell gestures to grab Mr. Lancer's attention and then jerks his head towards Samantha and Valerie. He's clearly expecting Lancer to pull the two girls from the gym due to his proximity, and Lancer realizes he probably should, but... well. They have a point.

"Fine!" the mayor snaps. Silence falls in the gym. Masters smooths down non-existent wrinkles on his suit, and the PR smile returns. "You all have valid points. I will use this opportunity to demonstrate another feature of the device. It functions both as a sort of taser, as in the example with Daniel, and—"

Masters holds up his hand, aims the device at it, and presses a button. A small blast of pink energy fires from the little thing and passes through Masters' hand. It continues across the auditorium and fizzles out about thirty feet away.

"See? No effect."

The students applaud just a bit more enthusiastically now, but all Lancer can do is stare.

Masters had turned the side of his hand towards the crowd, so no one could see the flat or the back of his hand. No one except Lancer. Lancer's position at the exit of the gym gives him a slightly more unique vantage point than the students and even the other teachers in the room.

Thus, he's pretty sure he's the only one to notice that a portion of Masters' hand had briefly turned invisible, allowing the blast to pass through unimpeded.

Lancer blinks and shakes his head. His age must finally be getting the best of him. What he saw— what he *thought* he saw— it's impossible. He had to have hallucinated the flash of silver he saw through Masters' hand, had to have imagined the *perfectly round circle of air* that he thought he had seen for a brief second.

He's so stunned that he barely registers the mayor continuing to speak. Masters explains that the Pocket Master is only to be used in emergencies when a ghost threatens imminent harm and that it is merely a painful deterrent that will force a ghost to retreat instead of attack. He then ends his demonstration and dismisses himself. Mr. Powell and Ms. Hamilton bring the two boxes on-stage over to the exit where Mr. Lancer is standing as Principal Ishiyama returns to the stage and thanks Mr. Masters for his "wonderful contribution."

"Are you alright, Edward?" Mr. Powell asks quietly after straightening.

"What?" Lancer asks.

"You look like... well. You look like you've seen a ghost," Ms. Hamilton says, only half-joking.

Lancer isn't quite sure what he saw, but he can't tell them that. He merely shakes his head and smiles.

"I'm quite alright. I simply got lost in thought for a moment."

They nod and walk off to begin directing the exit of the students from the gym. Principal Ishiyama instructs the students to grab a Pocket Master on their way out of the door.

Mr. Lancer bends to pick up one of the little devices to examine it closer. It's about the weight and size of a flashlight, though a little thinner. Lancer isn't sure how to feel about holding it.

He hears a laugh and looks up just in time to see Dash Baxter fire his Pocket Master at one of his friends. *Lord of the Flies,* that boy can really be an agent of chaos sometimes!

Lancer's first instinct is panic, but the other football player, Logan Darnell, is completely fine. The blast had gone straight through his shoulder and out the other side. The boy himself looked surprised yet unharmed. He giggles with his friends and then, like a switch had been flipped, the group of football players seems to be partaking in an impromptu game of Pocket Master laser tag.

Well. They're as harmless as the mayor said, then.

When the last of the students are out of the gym, Lancer starts the short trek back to his classroom. The assembly was at the end of the day, so there are buses and parents outside of the building ready to take students back home. He starts to head back to his classroom but stops when he notices the small group of students gathered around Daniel and his friends. Though this isn't anything newsworthy, Lancer supposes it wouldn't hurt to check in with the boy and make sure he's alright. While Masters had reassured everyone that his invention is of no harm to humans, he still can't quite get over the look on Daniel's face when the mayor had poked him with the thing.

Mr. Lancer approaches, getting within earshot of the conversation. Daniel is saying, "Yeah, I'm okay, promise," and several variations thereof— apparently Lancer hadn't been the only one concerned. When he looks up and notices his teacher's approach, he trails off. The other students look up as well, and four of them slink away. Samantha, Tucker, and surprisingly Valerie remain. Lancer recalls the look shared between the two girls earlier. He had sensed their mutual dislike for a long time, but Valerie's solidarity in the gym may have dispelled their tension at least temporarily.

"Hello to the four of you. Daniel... I know the mayor said you'd be alright, but I just wanted to be certain. The device didn't harm you?"

"Yes, sir," he says. "It just tingled. Like Vl— like Mr. Masters said it might."

Lancer doesn't miss the slip up. He had thought it was weird when Daniel had called the mayor by his first name in the prank video, but it likely is just an indicator of their 'history.'

Samantha snorts and mumbles something under her breath. Daniel shoots a sharp look in her direction before hiking up his bookbag on his back and turning to Mr. Lancer with a smile that is probably meant to be reassuring.

"Thanks for checking in, Mr. Lancer. We, uh. We should probably go now."

Mr. Lancer nods. "You all have a nice day, then."

The other three chirp their goodbyes as well, and Lancer turns to walk away from them. They're not out of earshot before Lancer hears Valerie say, "He knows, doesn't he? Masters. He knows, and he still made you do that."

"Yeah, he's kind of a jerk like that."

Samantha makes another comment that Lancer can't quite discern, though her other two— three?— friends laugh in response to it.

So. Mayor Vlad Masters is not as honorable of a character as he seems to present himself. Can Lancer even do anything with this information? He doubts it. The man's influence in the town is pervasive, and Lancer can't really *prove* that he's actually done anything wrong. It's best not to press it.

Mr. Lancer can still despise the man anyway.

Chapter End Notes

At least Mrs. Focutta got her grocery shopping done.

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This chapter was a little rushed and I couldn't proofread much before posting, so please let me know if anything feels off. It's also, like *super* long to make up for the fact that I may have to take a two-week hiatus. I dunno yet. Spring Break is next week, and I just found out today that my campus is essentially shutting down operations because of coronavirus fears. We have until March 23rd to be packed up and out of our dorms unless there are special circumstances for staying on campus. We're finishing

out the semester with online classes from home. PLUS I still have midterms this week, so lmao.

Life is hard. Oh well.

Never fear! This fic can and shall continue. I just need to put it on the backburner for a couple weeks. :) I'd originally planned a Spring Break hiatus anyway, cause I wasn't sure about my access to the internet over the break. Uhh. That was probably TMI. Whatever.

When I started this fic, it wasn't supposed to have any Plot. But then. Well. Vlad just *had* to retaliate for the pranks, didn't he? :) Also. I feel kinda weird about Lancer's narration for this chapter. It feels off to me. Lemme know what you think?

EDIT 8/8/2020: Made some minor edits.

Cryptids Might Actually Be A Thing?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lancer stares at the sheet of copy paper in front of him. The top of the page reads *"The Fenton Mystery"* in his partial-cursive script, and its items read:

- *sudden popularity*
- *ViewTube channel - active for longer than he's been popular, but many videos may be hidden?*
  - *"parkour" and "training", building explorations*
- *punched for lying about something "unsafe"? (Valerie)*
- *tutors - possibly unrelated, but why now?*
- *IBS lie + class support*
- *argument about Daniel as "you-know-who" (Kiersten + Dunya) - some other identity?*
- *Dale hug?*
- *Masters targeting him - possibly only related to pranks*
  - ~~*Masters' hand?????*~~

This is... what is he doing?

Mr. Lancer drops his pen and sits back, suddenly intensely and uncomfortably self-reflective.

Is this stalking? This might be stalking.

1984, he's stalking his student.

What is wrong with him?

Lancer crumples up the piece of paper and tosses it into the trashcan by his desk, suddenly disgusted with himself. This is some sort of line crossing, right? It has to be. Is his life really so uninteresting that he has to obsess over someone else's? A *student,* of all people?

He has work he should be doing. The last of his students left a few minutes ago. He'll finish this up, and then he'll go home. He needs to get this Daniel Fenton mystery out of his head. He takes out his lesson plans for tomorrow and begins reviewing them.

After a moment, his eyes slowly slide towards the trashcan where he'd thrown away the list... no! No. Lesson plans. He is working on lesson plans right now.

Seconds later, his laptop is open and he's looking up Daniel's ViewTube channel again. Temptation is an alluring mistress, and it's not like he's actively following Daniel home or something. This probably isn't stalking. (Silently, he begs a higher power for forgiveness and promises this is merely satiation of burning curiosity.)

He scrolls through the boy's channel. While he knows the videos are more than just "parkour," it's still surprising to see the breadth of the subject matter. Daniel explores abandoned places, "trains" in the woods at night, and takes ridiculous dares that his commenters ask him to do. From scaling buildings and backflipping off of absurdly high places, to swinging from trees and apparently concussing himself in abandoned hospitals, Lancer wonders when the boy has the time to do all of this.

He scrolls back up to the most recent video. Titled "Ouija Board Gone Wrong: What Happened At The Lake," it's dated two weeks after Dale Pruitt's family ended up in the news. Just how involved *were* Daniel and his friends with the incident?

Lancer clicks and starts watching. It starts out innocently enough, with Daniel, Samantha, and Tucker in a forest somewhere, sitting in a circle around a wooden board with the alphabet and some other things on it. That must be the "Ouija board," then. What is it for, exactly?

He takes a quick moment to do some searching. Ah. A "spirit board," used for supposedly communicating with the dead. Cute. There is a sort of irony in trying to "talk to ghosts" when most residents of Amity Park see them on a weekly basis. He supposes that's what the joke of the video is.

The scene progresses. Daniel suggests that Tucker put the camera down and instead put both hands on the little wooden triangle they call a "planchette." The video fast forwards through about ten minutes of nothing happening, according to a note at the bottom of the screen, and they finally decide to give up.

That's when things start going oddly.

Tucker startles after thinking he saw something move in the woods. The jolt of the camera honestly makes Lancer jump as well, but no one has to know that. Despite knowing he's likely alone in this wing of the building, he turns his camera screen away from the door a bit. He's not doing anything wrong. He just wants privacy... though the irony of that sad justification is not lost on him.

Samantha starts behaving strangely. If the girl is acting, she's doing a pretty convincing job of it. Cryptic answers and odd statements in response to questioning, unnatural movements, and finally just flat-out running when Tucker directly addresses the "ghost or whatever" apparently possessing her. It's quite unnerving to witness, and Lancer can't imagine what her friends must have been feeling throughout the entire thing.

Then again... Daniel seems pretty level-headed throughout the ordeal. A little spooked, sure, but compared to Tucker's bouncing between audible fear and apparent frustration, Daniel makes a visible effort to calmly gain more information about the situation. Lancer feels oddly proud of his student. To be honest, though, *both* Daniel and Tucker seem mostly unfazed by whatever has taken over their friend's body. Despite Tucker's obvious unease, he's not running screaming or showing nearly the amount of panic Lancer feels the boy is due. Daniel just seems to have a better handle on himself.

There's a bit of chaos as the boys take off after Samantha. The camera semi-steadies a few times as Tucker appears to randomly point it at the trees, but text at the bottom of the screen explains that these are instances in which Tucker felt like he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Lancer rewinds the video a couple times to try and glimpse what Tucker supposedly saw, but he’s never able to spot anything among the trees.

Daniel eventually grabs Samantha's arm and demands that whatever is inside her "get out" so they can have a "civil conversation," which to Lancer seems like an incredibly easy way to anger the spirit further. Any horror movie will tell you that, especially after the thing had *just* yelled at Daniel in a demonic-sounding voice.

But then Tucker quiets his friend without explanation. The camera is still for a long moment, and Lancer holds his breath both in apprehension and curiosity. More text at the bottom of the screen tells the viewer that Tucker had decided to stop trying to capture the presence and instead just pay attention to wherever it was trying to guide them. The camera eventually turns towards a lake they

had stopped by and, after another moment, zooms into a bright object— a stuffed animal?— sitting on the frozen lake water next to a dark spot. What is that?

Lancer realizes the spot is a *hole* at the same time that Tucker vocalizes as much. There's some yelling, and then the renewed chaos ends abruptly when Daniel tells Tucker to stop filming.

The video cuts to the three students in what appears to be a... *police car?!* What had they done?

Daniel sits squished and oddly jacketless in between his two friends, who are both bundled up to the extremes. Sam leans her head on the window beside her, hair hiding her features. She seems exhausted. Tucker stares blankly off-camera, absentmindedly rubbing at gloveless hands. Daniel himself appears rattled as well, running a hand through his thick hair and tangling his fingers in the strands at the back of his head as he gives a short explanation of what happened— Phantom had shown up and flown the child to the hospital after fishing her out of the water. He promises an update, and then the clip ends.

The final segment of the video was shot in a bedroom that Lancer assumes is Daniel's. The three friends seem much more relaxed as they lounge on Daniel's bed, likely a few days after the previous clips, and he gives the aforementioned update.

Dale Pruitt had been babysitting his 6-year-old sister Emille when she'd wandered off for an "adventure" while he wasn't paying attention. The police had just gotten done responding to his 911 call when they got dispatched to Lake Eerie in response to a call from Samantha. As the lake is a short walk from the Pruitts' backyard, they drove over and arrived shortly after Phantom left. The child in question had to be treated for some mild frostbite but was otherwise expected to make a full recovery thanks to Phantom. It's a happy ending to a no-doubt horrifying ordeal for the three of them.

They'd never figured out what had possessed Samantha, though Tucker claimed he kept seeing the thing out of the corner of his eye. He even said he briefly saw it standing by the lake while they were in the squad car. A short clip from earlier in the video is replayed, except this time there's a red circle highlighting something that looks like hair or fabric disappearing off-screen. Samantha adds that she felt some sort of desperate presence pushing at her mind, and had let it guide her friends because she hadn't sensed any ill intent.

"So. Believe what you will of that, I guess?" Daniel says with a shrug. The next few moments involve Daniel endearingly coordinating the "sign-off" of the video with his friends. Then:

"Manson—"

"Foley—"

"And Fenton, out."

There's a moment when they all stare seriously at the camera. Then, Tucker starts giggling. Daniel full-out laughs, and Sam shakes her head at the boys even as she cracks a smile. Daniel falls back onto his bed, and the video fades into the music that Lancer is now associating with the end of Daniel's videos.

And then it's over.

Lancer frowns. He should probably check in with them, Samantha especially. He's not sure he's ever had a one-on-one with the girl outside of parent-teacher conferences, but he would like to make sure she's alright. He should check in with all of them, really, though he's not really sure what

to do other than offer support and a willing ear. Lancer *supposes* they could have orchestrated something for the sake of the video, but... in this town? The chances of it being real are pretty high.

Concern about their well-being after that experience aside, he finds himself rewinding to the moment when Daniel had told Tucker to stop filming.

In the split second before the clip ends, Daniel had turned tail and looked like he was going to run straight onto the ice. He wouldn't have done that, though, right? He knows how dangerous that is, and they hadn't mentioned him trying to save the girl in their explanation of what happened.

Yet, Lancer thinks back to Dale's gratitude the other day in the hallway. Perhaps Daniel *did* have a bigger role in the rescue than he would like people to think. Why hide it, though? Perhaps the boy has grown weary of all the attention from his peers. Daniel is fairly reserved when not around his friends. He'd seemed flattered by the attention at first, but Lancer has seen him shrink away from overly loud peers who surprise him with greetings in the halls. Whether he's reacting to the noise or the attention, Lancer isn't sure, but it's understandable that he would want to avoid the limelight for a while.

Or Lancer could just be overthinking things again.

He ignores that thought and scrolls down to the comments of the video.

Showing (3) of (39) comments on 'Ouija Board Gone Wrong: What Happened At The Lake':

guest9201: HOW are you only wearing a hoodie my dude?? It was freezing!

obi kwan kenobi: also lmao you never explain why you guys are in the back of a police car

HBitosexual: so... there's a thing in the woods, and it's NOT a ghost? Nice. #CryptidsAreReal

Hmm. Lancer is less concerned about them being in a police car since he can now easily picture one of the officers volunteering to drive the children home. What he is more focused on is the fact that Daniel *had* only been wearing a light jacket and a wool hat for most of the video. He hadn't even had gloves on! And in the car, he hadn't had the jacket on at all. While it may have been sitting on his lap or somewhere else out of sight, there was still the question of why he had taken it off in the first place. Was he not cold?

Now that Lancer thinks about it... there have been times when Daniel wasn't wearing winter gear when he really should have. Lancer assumed it was because he didn't have certain things, but perhaps he's just not as sensitive to colder temperatures? That's probably what it is. Illinois winters are unforgiving, but Daniel may just be one of the lucky few who just doesn't get that cold. Must be nice.

Then there's the other matter of whatever it was the kids found. The thing in the woods that they hadn't been able to explain. Many of the comments mention someone named "Kelton," who is apparently relevant to Daniel's exploration of a nearby abandoned hospital. The word "cryptid" appears a lot as well. It's a bit unnerving to think about, recalling Sam's actions and Tucker's genuine fear. Amity Park may be plagued by creatures other than just ghosts, but it wouldn't be entirely off-brand for their little town.

As long as they stay far away from Lancer and don't hurt anybody, they can do whatever they want.

Chapter End Notes

Does Phantom have experience fighting cryptids, Lancer wonders? He kind of hopes he doesn't have to find out.

—

Hello, all! Coronavirus, amirite? I just had my first live stream class this morning and, uh. Well. It happened. It wasn't that bad, actually, since the class only has six students in it, but SOMEONE didn't turn off their mic whenever they were typing despite multiple passive-aggressive comments from other people about it. That was annoying.

Oh, well. I'm grateful that I'm safe. Had a minor scare yesterday when my throat felt scratchy, but I woke up this morning and felt fine. I hope you all are doing alright! Ao3 and reading and doing art have been my escapes from my family and I hope this chapter provides a temporary escape for some of you.

As always, if you have a fun idea for an anecdote and/or some weird thing about Danny that Lancer may notice, lemme know in the comments! Potkanka and I think someone else was like, "Hey, maybe Danny doesn't get cold as easily?" and I LOVED that so it showed up in this chapter.

Also. Things get a bit heavy in the next 2-3 chapters. Bullying and discussion of abuse feature pretty prominently in all three, so. Fair warning. Then things go back to being pretty silly or lighthearted for Chs. 14-19, and after that. Well. You'll just have to see. :)

EDIT 8/8/2020: Made some minor fixes.

Snap...

Chapter Notes

Please see the chapter notes at the end of the chapter for warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Fenton!"

A locker door slams. Footsteps.

"Fenton! Wait up!"

Lancer pauses, red pen halfway through marking an "X" on an incorrect answer. School has ended. He's in his classroom, grading quizzes from earlier that day, and he's left the door open in a valiant but largely ineffective attempt to allow some of the sluggish warm air from the school's heating system to escape his classroom.

Something is off. Dash's voice has an odd tone to it. It's enough that Lancer decides to put his pen down and stand, ready to try to prevent an oncoming conflict if he can, but—

"I'm sorry."

Lancer blinks. Dash Baxter? Apologizing? To Daniel Fenton, of all people? *Wuthering Heights,* Lancer never thought he would witness it. He moves towards the door to close it and give his students some privacy, but... he stops short of reaching the handle.

Is eavesdropping on his students wrong? Probably. If he's being honest with himself, though, he's been doing a lot of that lately, and he already crossed the line when he fished that list back out of the trashcan. There's really no going back now. Lancer *has* to know how this ends. With that, he sits back down at his desk, pen in hand but quizzes forgotten.

Daniel's response to Dash's statement is an ambivalent, "Cool."

"...That's it?" Dash's voice asks.

"What?" Daniel says. "I said 'cool.' What else do you want me to say?"

"I dunno. That you forgive me or something? I feel... bad."

"Hmm," Danny says. "So, let me get this straight. You feel 'bad' and you want me to forgive you for tormenting me and a bunch of other people since elementary school?"

"Um... yeah?"

"Hmmm. Nah. I don't think I will."

Lancer has heard his students use the word "shook" to describe themselves when something has deeply affected them. The word sounds about right at the moment; he feels very shook. Daniel seems so... *flippant.* His words clearly suggest a simmering anger, but his tone is casual. Almost

offhand.

"...but... I'm *sorry* ," Dash whines. "What's it going to take?"

"Honestly, Dash? I don't know. Hmm... lemme think about it. Oh! I got it! You could start by acting like a *decent fucking human being."*

There it is. Lancer was half-expecting the sudden venom in the boy's voice, but it's still surprising all the same. High schoolers these days have foul mouths on them, but he's never witnessed Daniel cursing before. He's also never witnessed the boy standing up for himself against Dash.

Then again, this isn't their normal interaction. Something has shifted in their relationship— Dash, apologetic, and Daniel, unforgivingly angry. What happened?

Daniel barrels on. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry. I assumed you knew how to do that! Here, I'll help. Decent people don't shove people into lockers, or give people wedgies, or spill food over their heads, or—"

"I get it, Fenton. I'm dumb, I'm not stupid."

"Right, sorry. You're fully capable of being a good person, you just *choose* to act like a flaming piece of garbage. Got it."

"You're still mad."

"What gave you that clue?"

"Uh. You sound mad?"

"Congratu- *fucking*- lations, Dash! You figured something out." Receding footsteps. One of them is leaving.

"Wait! Are you just gonna be mad at me forever? I haven't pummeled you for like a month!"

There's a quick shuffling of footsteps and the telltale rattle that accompanies a back being pushed aggressively against the lockers. Lancer stands again, because Dash has probably gotten physical, but Daniel's voice is the one that floats around the corner again.

"What about Mikey this morning, huh? You think not beating *me* up for a few lousy weeks will make everything okay? You're not obligated to my forgiveness, Dash! I don't *want* to forgive you. I literally hate your guts, dude! You've made my life even more hellish than it already is! What are you expecting? Do you want us to be friends?"

"I..." Dash trails off. He doesn't answer.

"You know my secret now. Awesome. Now that you know? Leave. Me. *Alone.* And, while you're at it, leave everyone else alone, too."

Dimly, Lancer registers the confirmation that there *is* a secret, completely validating his "Fenton Mystery" theory, but there are more pressing matters at the moment.

Receding footsteps again. At the last possible moment, Dash asks, "Did I do it?"

There's a fear, a desperation in his voice, like he's simultaneously afraid of hearing the answer and petrified of not knowing the answer.

"You said in your Concord thing that something happened in a lab, but..." He trails off. Lancer

listens with bated breath, torn between concern and curiosity. Something happened in a lab? What is Dash referring to? What exactly is he trying to ask?

A long silence.

Daniel's voice is a little quieter, and Lancer has to strain to hear him say, "No. No, Dash, you didn't kill me. But... you almost did. A long time ago."

"I'm sorry about the rib thing, man, I swear—"

"Jeez, Dash, I'm not— it's not just the physical injuries that can kill someone."

Lancer goes cold.

Had Daniel...?

"...what?" Dash asks, clearly not understanding.

"Forget it," Daniel says. "Just. Leave me alone. Please?"

This time, when the footsteps start to fade, Dash doesn't stop them.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: language and brief reference to suicide.

—

There is a secret. Lancer hasn't forgotten that.

—

I was *this* close to forgetting to post today. Oop.

This chapter's a bit on the shorter side. The next one won't, but the one after will. Stay tuned! My blocker's kicking me off of Ao3 in 60 seconds so bye.

EDIT 8/8/2020: Made some minor fixes.

... Crackle ...

Chapter Notes

> Buckle up. Warnings at the beginning this time: mentions of suicide, bullying, physical abuse... I think that's it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lancer keeps thinking about Daniel's conversation with Dash yesterday. He can't just let this slide, can he? His student had alluded to being *suicidal,* he has to do something... Granted, the way the boy had spoken about it made it seem like it was a thing of the past, but what if that's not the case? If the comment about Dash not "killing" him is any indication, the boy literally considers himself dead! That's not the mindset of someone with stellar mental health. But how does Lancer even bring it up? "I eavesdropped on a conversation you had with the bully who's tormented you for over a decade because I'm obsessed with this secret that you literally admitted to having, and I think you need help even though you've never once opened up to me in the past"?

Should he tell the counselor? Should he meet with the boy's parents? Should he just offer support? What's the right course of action here? He *is* legally a mandatory reporter, but doesn't that only apply to situations where danger is immediate? While a required but largely uninformative staff training had briefly touched on self-destructive behavior in teenagers, nothing had even remotely prepared him for this situation. He's leaning towards telling the counselor, but the counselor-is-actually-a-ghost fiasco from a while ago has him hesitant.

Mr. Lancer holds Daniel back that afternoon after school. The boy dismisses his friends, who linger by the door for him. Tucker shrugs and walks off, promising to wait. Samantha glances suspiciously between Daniel and Mr. Lancer and raises an eyebrow at her friend. When Daniel shrugs, she shakes her head and pulls the door closed behind her.

Lancer turns to the boy in front of him. Daniel is standing in front of Lancer's desk. In some ways, he seems healthier than Lancer has ever seen him. He also seems more relaxed than he has been for most of the two and a half years that Lancer has known him. His skin is a light tan instead of a pasty pallor, and his slouch is more indicative of disinterest rather than trying to make himself a smaller target. Lancer is reminded of a conversation from forever ago, when Dunya and Kiersten were arguing over Daniel's... physique. Up close like this, Lancer is inclined to agree with Dunya. Daniel has definitely grown from the scrawny slip of a child he was at the beginning of his freshman year.

Yet... there are still dark shadows under his eyes. A bandage peeks over the neckline of his shirt, white gauze held secure by clear tape. Daniel notices his gaze and shifts, poorly disguising the motion as casual as he tugs at the shirt to hide the bandage.

Another thought strikes Mr. Lancer: What if the "parkour" is actually a sign of some deeper issue? What if that's how Daniel has been getting hurt outside of the bullying? Mr. Lancer's not stupid, he's noticed the injuries that Daniel occasionally shows up to school with, but he's always been dodgy about it when questioned. It makes sense— he's already admitted somewhere on his channel that he has some videos he doesn't want to share. Maybe he's been doing these dangerous stunts for a long time and has only now decided to share them. And while he hasn't fallen or anything in the

few parkour videos that Lancer has seen, videos can be edited.

What if he's lost all regard for his personal safety because he doesn't *care* anymore?

Little Men, this is difficult. How does Lancer pull his student from the brink of self-destruction if he's been there for years? Has Lancer been treating signs of the boy's *distress* as a fun mystery to figure out?!

"I've seen your ViewTube channel," Mr. Lancer finally says to open the conversation. He intentionally keeps his voice level, ignoring his growing panicked concern.

"Oh. Okay," Daniel replies, visibly relaxing. His channel is clearly the last thing he was expecting to talk about. What had he been bracing himself for?

"It's very interesting. I've seen a couple of your videos," Lancer continues.

"Oh. Um. Okay. Thanks? I think?" To be fair, Lancer isn't sure there's a protocol on how to respond when your teacher says they've watched some of your videos. Daniel frowns. "Are you gonna tell me to stop, Mr. Lancer?"

"I— well. Have a seat, Daniel."

He drags up a seat with surprisingly little difficulty, considering how heavy the blasted things are.

"May I ask why you started doing the videos?"

Daniel shrugs. "It was just a training thing at first."

"'A training thing'?" Mr. Lancer echoes. He decides to fall back on his favorite strategy of repeating phrases back so the student unknowingly elaborates.

"Yes, sir. I mean. I called it training. It was really just working out. But it's a lot more fun now with the parkour stuff. That's what you're worried about, right?"

So the parkour is a *recent* development. There goes that explanation for past injuries. Lancer moves on.

"Yes. You understand why I'm concerned about your safety then?"

"Sure. Jumping from high places with no net or anything isn't exactly the safest thing in the world."

"But... you don't care?"

"I mean, sure, but I'm always fine."

Oh. That's... not the response Lancer was expecting. "You're 'always fine.'"

"Yeah. I've never actually gotten hurt on a run. It's literally the safest thing ever. Well. For me, at least. I know what I'm doing, sir."

Well, that doesn't make sense.

"But you said the parkour is something you recently started doing. You've never hurt yourself while you were still figuring out how to go about it? You've never hurt yourself while filming a video?"

Daniel briefly hesitates. "Um. A couple times, I guess, but it's pretty rare. I got a concussion once, but that was kind of unavoidable. But I'm not stupid enough to do lasting damage, and uh. I picked up parkour pretty quickly, so, um... yeah."

"Ah. So it's not that you don't care about getting hurt. You're merely confident you won't seriously injure yourself?"

"Yes, sir. Of course I care about being hurt, why wouldn't I?"

Alright. There's a story there. Well, he *does* have a video that mentions getting a concussion in its title, because Lancer remembers scrolling past it. That sounds like it easily could have had "lasting damage," but he supposes that story is not his priority right now.

At the very least, it doesn't seem like the boy has no regard for his safety. He just thinks he's indestructible. Lancer isn't sure which is worse. One concern has just been replaced by another, but Lancer thinks hubris may be easier to deal with than apathy. One step at a time, because the question of how Daniel is getting hurt is still in the air.

Lancer tries for a different tactic.

"Has the bullying stopped?"

Daniel sits up, frowning.

"Um... what?"

"The bullying. Has it stopped?"

"Uh..."

Lancer has never actually directly addressed the bullying before, only hinted at there being resources to deal with it. Daniel is very obviously trying to find a way to brush it off like he normally does. Lancer refuses to let it happen this time.

He's been failing this boy for the past two and a half years. No longer.

"Please don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Daniel."

Daniel sighs, slouching further. "Fine. Yeah, it's mostly stopped. Being kinda popular is cool like that, I guess. Sometimes people say things, but it's not... physical. Not anymore."

"So the bullies are no longer hurting you, and these parkour runs rarely hurt you, and you don't injure yourself in your other videos?"

"Right..."

"You know what I'm going to ask next, Daniel."

"I don't...?" He frowns and purses his lips, trying to understand what his teacher is suggesting. Then, realization washes over his features. "Oh," he says quietly.

"Daniel?"

"Okay, listen... I'm just a clumsy person."

"How did you hurt your neck?"

"I... I fell."

"How did you fall?"

"Down the stairs?"

"Please, Daniel. The truth."

"That is the truth!"

The boy is on the defensive now, and Mr. Lancer realizes he's leaned forward over his desk. He may be coming off as a bit aggressive in his questioning. He stands and walks over to crouch on the ground in front of his student's desk, arms folded on top of it in a way he hopes isn't threatening.

"Daniel... Danny. You know you can talk to me if you need to. You know that, right?"

"Sure, Mr. Lancer," his student responds with the tone of someone that has no intention of doing so.

"I mean it," Lancer presses. "I want to know that you're okay. I want to know that you're not hurting yourself."

"I already told you the runs are perfectly safe."

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what...? Oh. Okay, wait, no, I wouldn't... this isn't intentional. I promise. It just kinda happens."

"Okay," Lancer says. That's another possible source of injury tentatively ticked off the list, which leaves... "Is it your parents?"

"No! God, no. They love me, they wouldn't hurt their little *Danny Fenton."*

There. The way he said that. Lancer may be onto something here, as much as he hates this conversation and how uncomfortable Daniel clearly feels. He hopes this isn't something that will involve Child Protective Services, but if it comes to it...

"They wouldn't hurt Danny Fenton," Mr. Lancer echoes softly. "Would they hurt... someone else?"

Daniel stares at him for a long moment. What he's searching for, Lancer doesn't know, but the scrutiny somehow grows a bit unsettling after a few seconds. This is probably "the staring thing" mentioned in the comments of a couple of Daniel's exploration videos. Lancer does his best to keep his expression open and compassionate, instead of revealing the growing unease at the look in his student's eyes.

"Do you know?" he finally whispers, voice hesitant. Vulnerable. Almost pleading, somehow. He waits patiently for an answer.

Lancer knows he's being tested somehow, knows that the answer to this question is Very Important and could change something big, could potentially change their relationship forever, but...

...he doesn't know.

He doesn't know what Daniel is asking him.

"Do I know...?" Mr. Lancer asks, falling back on the tried-and-true echoing strategy and hoping the boy elaborates. It doesn't work this time. Daniel visibly shuts down from the conversation, leaning back and shaking his head a little with a rueful smile.

Lancer aches.

He'd been *so close.*

"I don't know what you're talking about, but could you tell me?" Mr. Lancer tries again.

"Nevermind, don't worry about it," Daniel says, his tone a forced casual. He leans down to pick up his book bag before standing. "You were right, this thing on my neck? *Totally* from a parkour video. I just didn't want you to tell me to stop."

An obvious lie, as he hadn't even bothered to try to sound convincing, and both of them know it.

"Thanks for looking out for me, Mr. Lancer. Can I go now?"

He doesn't even sound upset or agitated or anything. He seems casually neutral, like they'd been talking about the weather or the morning announcements. Only the way his fist harshly squeezes his bookbag strap suggests anything he's actually feeling. Lancer has seen Danny flustered or embarrassed or confused, which seem to be his three primary emotions. This? This careful blankness, clearly hiding some deeper emotion he doesn't want to share? This is new, and Lancer doesn't know what to do.

"You're welcome to leave," Mr. Lancer says, defeated. "But, Danny, listen, I'm always here for you. Okay?"

"Thanks, Mr. Lancer!" Danny chirps, a fake smile on his face as he walks out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Lancer has never felt so defeated.
--
Two more chapters of this mini bullying arc.

Just so you know, this is probably the saddest chapter, I think. This is the low point. Things go up from here. There's another chapter couple chapters near the end where Lancer is hella freaking out, but one of them is a "I've failed my student but maybe not really?" freakout and the other is a funny freakout.

EDIT 8/8/2020: Made some minor fixes.

...Another Crackle...

Chapter Notes

See end notes for trigger warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Lancer turns on the news that evening, Phantom's face is on the screen.

He frowns, double-checking that he's on the news channel. He definitely is. The logo of the news station is still visible in the bottom corner of the screen, but neither Lance Thunder, Harriet Chin, or any of their coworkers are anywhere in sight. What is going on?

Next to Phantom is a black and white ghost with glasses and freckles, who looks no older than most Casper High students. On his other side is the rocker ghost Ember, arms crossed as she glares at the camera. In the back and nearly invisible, the arm of the electronic ghost Technus is plugged into the wall, green energy flowing into the wall socket next to him. He clearly is not the focus of the video.

The ribbon at the bottom of the screen reads: *"We are sorry for any inconvenience, it appears the news feed has been taken over by ghosts."* It repeats this message over and over again.

Lancer blinks. Alright then.

"I have a couple people here who want to say something," Phantom says. He seems uncharacteristically somber, lacking the usual confident smile.

"Hiya!" the young ghost next to him says. "I'm Sidney Poindexter. I haunt Casper High, but you've probably never seen me. I don't like showing myself, really."

Um. How long has this ghost been haunting Casper High? Why is Lancer only just learning of him? Yet, the name and his face sound familiar.

Oh. The dusty plaque in the main office, "In Memoriam of Sidney Poindexter." Lancer passes it almost every day, but he's never given it a second thought. He's never bothered to do the subtraction for the years on the little metal plate, having always assumed it was remembering an old faculty member.

Sidney looks at Phantom, seemingly nervous.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," Phantom says.

Sidney shakes his head. "No, this is important."

Lancer gets a sinking feeling in his stomach. The ghost is young and haunts Casper High, and the plaque in the front office means he has to have been a student. Though there are obviously period-related differences, if he dressed like that today... well, combined with his voice and his stature, he would be an easy target for bullying.

Mr. Lancer can guess where this is going.

Poindexter takes a deep breath and releases it. Then, he stares directly at the camera.

"When I was alive, I was bullied pretty much all the time. I had no friends. People treated me badly. The usual stuff, you know— telling me I was worthless, stupid, a nobody, yadda yadda yadda. And one day, I couldn't take it anymore, so..."

The implication is loud enough.

"When I came back, I started haunting the bullies of Casper High to make their lives as miserable as they made mine. Phantom taught me to stop using my powers against the living, so you don't have to worry about that anymore, I guess, but..."

Ember gets up and disappears off-screen. She reappears on Sidney's other side. In a surprisingly gentle gesture, she hooks an arm around his shoulders in a sideways hug. He seems initially surprised, but then he puts his head on her shoulder. Phantom, who'd been sitting quietly by Sidney's side, rubs the boy's back.

Lancer is suddenly struck by how young the three ghosts look. Ember may be a little older than the other two, but all three of them are teenagers. *Kids.*

And they'll never get to be anything more than that.

Ember glares at the camera again. "Stop [BLEEP] bullying people," she growls.

Phantom looks at the camera, too, electric green eyes shining with uncharacteristic intensity.

"Think about what you're doing when you decide to hurt someone," he says quietly.

The clip ends. The screen now shows the various members of the newsroom sitting stunned.

"Um... you heard them, people," Lance Thunder says, quickly regaining his composure. "Stop bullying. It's... not good."

There's a long quiet pause, and then they awkwardly move onto the weather. Lancer shuts off the TV.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: references to suicide and bullying.

—

Lancer feels really tired, and really mortal.

—

I forgot to do research on how Sidney spoke and by the time I thought to do so, it was 20 minutes to midnight on my posting day so I figured, screw it.

Short chapter. The next one is also short, and I could have combined the two but that felt icky so. Here ya go. Happy quarantine!

... And a Gentle Pop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

School the next day is quite noticeably different.

At the very least, many of the teachers seem less willing to turn a blind eye to the behavior of the more aggressive students. Coach Tetslaff handed out three detentions today when she found out that three girls had stolen a classmate's clothes in the locker room and forced her to play keep-away in the parking lot to get them back. Principal Ishiyama is actually starting to enforce the punishment of many of the athletes and other competitive extracurricular students for their treatment of others, regardless of whether or not they have a game or meet or whatever coming up.

Over the course of the day, more and more groups of students themselves start ganging up on the A-Listers and other abusive students when someone is being attacked. Some of the groups are even led by A-Listers themselves. Lancer watches, fascinated, as Nathan Knight, Heather Ito, Jason Chin and Angelique Francis approach none other than Dale Pruitt, who has cornered another student that Lancer can't quite see at the end of the hallway. When Dale turns to threaten them for interfering, he finds himself very quickly surrounded by Kwan and a couple other football players. Cowed, Dale releases the shirt of his victim and slinks away.

Harley Flannigan demands that Paulina Sanchez apologize for insulting the skirt their friend Zander Gutierrez was wearing. Paulina scoffs at the suggestion, but then Star Haugen turns on her as well. Seeming shocked and slightly wounded at Star's betrayal, Paulina begrudgingly apologizes before flipping her hair and strutting off.

Fallon Valentine, star of the chess club with a penchant for putting down his fellow team members, is finally quiet and cooperative at a meet for once. It happens only after Amita Chandra snaps at him about his ego hurting both their team performance and his chances of ever getting back together with her, and a couple of other students in the club openly gapes at her after her outburst. One even starts applauding.

The most surprising anecdote, though, is probably of Dash Baxter. Peter Owolabe accidentally ran into Dash's back while distracted and dropped his books in the process. Terrified, Peter apologizes profusely and starts backing away. Dash seems to instinctively raise a fist, face twisted in a snarl. Then, he frowns and backs off. Instead of yelling, threatening, or chasing after Peter, Dash merely picks up the books, hands them back to Peter with a pat on the shoulder, and walks away.

The bullying issue definitely doesn't go away. Rome wasn't built in a day, after all, and there are still incidents of it occurring. Yet, the situation is still drastically different than it was before the hijacked news report. Lancer is definitely proud of the nearly unrealistic levels of altered behavior among the students and staff, but also... ashamed. Both of himself, and of the other faculty and students.

It took three dead kids for this school to realize how bad its bullying problem is.

Chapter End Notes

Lancer, for what it's worth, is definitely trying.

—

This is easily my most "unrealistic" chapter in terms of how I believe people in this universe would act. (It's also another short one, but most likely the last one this short for a while. Sorry this update is *checks clock* ten minutes late. Oops.)

It's not really possible to change people's behavior this quickly at the scale this chapter suggests. Not from just one news cast, at least. Even if overt bullying decreases, the number of microaggressions would probably increase in response. Facts.

This is my most self-indulgent chapter for that reason. It's my wishful thinking that One Hopeful Message can change things, but that's rarely true. So! Please don't try to tell me how unrealistic this chapter is in the comments, haha. I already know.

Speaking of comments! Tell me how you are! I want to know how others are doing. Vent to me. I'll read it. I'll respond. While I admittedly have been backlogged on comments lately, I promise I'll respond to each comment on this chapter as soon as I see it.

I'm also still up for chapter suggestions. :) I have a document where I keep the ones that intrigue me, even if I don't necessarily let you know I've been intrigued~

Have a good day!

Do You Even Lift, Bro?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lancer occasionally comes in to the school on the weekends. No matter what his coworkers may say, he refuses to call himself a workaholic. That isn't what this is. The fact that he also comes in early and leaves late during the week is also irrelevant. He's not even always using the time to work! He just likes being in his empty classroom. His desk is a much more comfortable place to get things done than his work table back home, and he's always much more productive here anyway.

He also thinks maybe he should be doing more than just sitting around in his lonely apartment playing *Doom* all day. Sue him.

Sometimes other teachers pop in for a Saturday afternoon workday as well, but usually the only other people who tend to be at Casper High on weekends are the sports teams. Every other Saturday evening is a football game, and the Casper High Ravens have their last game of the season happening next week. They've been practicing almost nonstop. After serving more detentions lately, most of the players are on their best behavior. From what Lancer has heard, Coach Tetslaff has been *very* hard on the boys who make decisions that costs them valuable practice time.

Lancer takes a walk around the school to see if any of his chatting buddies are around. He's especially hoping Mrs. Focutta is here. He finished reading the copy of *Pendragon* she gave him for filling in her chaperone shift, and he wants desperately to argue with her about the main character's dubious motivations.

His trek around the school takes him past the weight room, where the football team is currently working out. Hearing Coach Tetslaff's booming laugh, he decides to backtrack and pay a visit. The first thing Lancer notices is Coach Tetslaff and Mx. Motsepe off to the side by the check-in desk. Motsepe sips from a grey mug of what is probably coffee or Green Bull, knowing them. Tetslaff is doubled over, face cherry red from laughter. Motsepe notices Lancer's entrance and offers a single wave.

He glances over the room as he walks over to his coworkers. The exercise equipment is largely dominated by football players, though there appears to be a few other scattered athletes and solo students here as well. On paper, it's against the rules for students who aren't officially supposed to be in the weight room to use the equipment. The school doesn't bother enforcing that policy, however, so it's not uncommon to see random students in the room at any given point.

Kwan Kiew, accompanied by Tamar Jeladze and a couple other random student athletes, is nothing out of the ordinary. The fact that Daniel Fenton is also in that little group? That's a little more unexpected. Kwan is sitting patiently on the bench as Tamar appears to explain something to Daniel and two other students. She mimes lifting the barbell and gestures for Kwan to lay back.

Lancer refocuses his attention back on Tetslaff and Motsepe, coming to a stop next to the latter.

"What's so funny?" he asks. He's never seen her laugh like this before. It's infectious and brings an involuntary smile to his face.

Motsepe shakes their head slightly with a small, cryptic smile. Instead of a response, they tip their

head to sip from their mug, narrowly avoiding some of their black cloud of curls dipping into the cup.

Tetslaff slowly calms down with a few last chuckles as she wipes a tear from her eye. "Ah, it would take too long to explain, but Bokamoso is just *so*... I don't even know! She— I mean, sorry, they say the craziest things."

Interesting. Secret jokes, first-name basis and out-of-character guffaws from Tetslaff... Lancer may have to revisit Mr. Falluca's theory about the relationship between these two. It's no secret to the rest of the staff that they had recently grown close. For now, he just chuckles and shakes his head.

The three of them make small talk for a few minutes, but Lancer's eyes eventually drift back to Daniel and the other students around the bench press. Kwan stands, and Daniel goes to take his place. Kwan moves behind him to act as a spotter. Daniel puts his hands on the bar, and Kwan gently taps his fists to correct his grip.

"It surprised me, too," Motsepe says in their soft accent, tracking Lancer's gaze.

"Talkin' 'bout Fenton?" Tetslaff asks.

"I believe so, yes," Lancer says, watching the students. Kwan is talking now, moving his elbows around in a way that suggests he's explaining the right and wrong way to hold them.

Tetslaff chuckles again. "He just kinda wandered in a couple weeks ago. Seemed pretty lost, so I reckoned he was lookin' for someplace else, but nope. He wanted to learn how to use the equipment."

"Really?" Motsepe asks. "I didn't know that's what happened."

"Yep. Now he comes in every couple-a days to learn something else. Even before the, uh, Phantom on the news thing, the guys were weirdly okay with teaching him."

"'Weirdly?'" Lancer echoes.

Tetslaff hesitates. "Well. Yes. I, uh, can't speak for the other teams, but... the guys are a bit. Um. Sometimes they aren't very welcomin' to the kids that don't know what they're doin'. They... well. They've been pretty rough on some of the newbies in the past, just to be straight with ya."

Lancer could accuse her of not doing anything about this, especially because her hesitance suggests she's ashamed. That would be impolite and hypocritical, however, so he merely says, "Hmm."

Tetslaff clears her throat and continues. "Anyway. They've been really good about showing Fenton around and being decent to 'im. Jeladze spent a chunk of that first day he came in just tourin' him around the place and showin' him how to use things. Sometimes some of my guys actually help with demonstrations, like Kiew over there, and... well. It still boggles my mind sometimes."

She checks her watch with a frown. "But if Kiew doesn't get back to his own sets soon, I'ma have to say something."

Tetslaff scans the rest of the room, checking on the rest of the students. Lancer watches for a quiet moment as Daniel lifts the bar a few times with no weight on it, shifting his body slightly to get used to the movement.

It makes sense that the boy would want to learn how to use proper workout equipment. There's probably only so much he can safely do in the woods in his "training" videos. Well. Safely as a

relative term, considering the fact that he does dangerous stunts with very little protective gear.

As Kwan and Tamar load small discs onto either side of the bar and clip them into place, Coach Tetslaff leans back with a grin like she's getting ready for a show. "Heh. Wanna bet he can't get more than forty on that bar?"

"I would not underestimate him," Motsepe responds. "People did the same to me when I competed."

"You competed? In what?"

"I did weightlifting in university. I benched around 80kg at my peak."

Tetslaff and Lancer stare.

Motsepe sighs. "That should be... hmm. Almost 180 pounds? I think? I may be wrong."

"Whaaat?" Tetslaff says, gaping and giving Motsepe a very obvious once over. Lancer is pretty sure she's just "checking them out", as his students may say. She's not even being subtle about it. Regardless, he hasn't been on one of those benches in a few decades. From what he does remember from his cheerleading days, though, 180 pounds is quite impressive for someone of Motsepe's size.

"But you're teeny-tiny!" Tetslaff finally exclaims.

Motsepe shrugs, sipping from their mug again.

"Did you place in anything?"

"Yes, in a few national competitions."

"*Seriously?* How did you go from a weightlifting champ to a *bio* teacher?"

"You say that as if it's a downgrade."

"Well— I mean— I don't mean to—" Tetslaff fumbles, trying to backtrack. Lancer laughs at the sight of Motsepe's quiet, mischievous smile. He honestly doesn't know them very well. They're still relatively new to the school. He's tried reaching out, especially considering how they're treated by some of the other staff sometimes, but he had assumed Mx. Motsepe was aloof and uninterested in socialization based on the brief conversations he's had. Perhaps he judged too soon. The ability to render Coach Tetslaff speechless, of all people, is nothing to sneeze at.

Motsepe finally waves a hand to end Tetslaff's suffering. "I kid, I kid."

"Oh, okay. Uh. Er." Tetslaff clears her throat. "Have you competed in the U.S. at all? Does your championship status from South Africa carry over or anything?" Tetslaff practically has stars in her eyes. Lancer rolls his eyes with a small smile— the infatuation is pretty obvious when he's paying attention.

A rising murmur of conversation drags Lancer's attention back to Daniel on the bench. A few weights have been added since he first started lifting them, and he seems to be getting the bar up with surprising ease. Lancer can't tell how much weight it is from this distance, but if the small crowd of five or six students around him is any indication, he's going beyond expectations. He lifts one, two, three times before he puts the bar down and says something to Kwan and Tamar. The two seem perplexed, but dutifully jog away to grab a couple more of the weight plates.

Daniel beckons for more. Two other students leave and come back.

Lancer frowns.

Daniel gestures still for more weight. Lighter plates on the bar are exchanged out for heavier ones.

Lancer opens his mouth and turns slightly towards Tetslaff, eyes still on Daniel. That seems like a little much...

Daniel waves a hand for *more weight.*

By this point, there are about ten students who are either around him or watching from their own workout equipment. If the color code for the plates is the same as it used to be, Daniel has to have at least 250 pounds on that bar.

Lancer taps Tetslaff's shoulder. She waves him off, engrossed in badgering Motsepe about their newly revealed weightlifting history.

Daniel lies back down on the bench and scoots upward, flattening his feet on the floor and putting his hands on the bar. Kwan doesn't have to adjust his grip this time, though Tamar does put a staying hand on the bar and appears to ask Daniel if he's sure. Daniel shrugs, a cocky grin on his face. Kwan, Tamar, and two other students stand by as spotters this time. Those paying attention watch with bated breath as Daniel lifts the bar from its rest... brings it down... and *lifts.*

Someone whistles, loud enough to grab Tetslaff and Motsepe's attention. Through his reddened expression, Daniel manages another smile. Tetslaff swears.

Daniel lifts the barbell again. And again. And again. The cheering and yelling from the students around the room increases.

Of Mice and Men! The boy manages about *ten* reps before he finally sets the bar down. He sits up and rubs at his hands. He hadn't even seemed like he was straining himself at all! Kwan and Tamar shake his shoulders, yelling something unintelligible through the noise. Daniel laughs and waves them off with a sheepish grin.

Tetslaff marches over there, and the other gathered students scatter. Daniel seems momentarily panicked as she examines the amount of weight he has on the bars. She then turns to him and starts badgering him with questions. Having worked with her for almost a decade, Lancer knows she's just excited. Judging from the way he's shrinking away from her, though, Daniel may be perceiving it as aggression.

"She's scaring the poor child," Motsepe says, shaking their head.

"Well. He'll realize he's not in trouble. Eventually," Lancer says. He hopes.

He turns to Motsepe, recalling the earlier conversation. "So. 180 pounds, huh?"

Chapter End Notes

Lancer briefly considers going to the gym again. Then he laughs.

(And Lancer doesn't know this, but Danny totally looked up a reasonable amount of

weight for someone he is and then pushed that boundary. He can definitely lift more but he didn't want to raise suspicion.)

--

While the impromptu hiatus was unintentional, I think I should be okay with my regular posting schedule again. Thanks to those of you who have stuck around! I have a few other mini-fics planned for this series and I also plan to see this fic out til the end. :)

Also. I took intro weightlifting last year, and tried to keep things accurate. That being said, I don't know anything about the workout regimen of high school athletes (especially before an important match/game). If anything here is inaccurate *please* let me know!

Also. Mx. Motsepe and Tetslaff weren't supposed to have that huge of a role in this chapter but?? They just kept talking to each other??? ¯_(ツ)_/¯ And Tetslaff has a Southern accent in my head, which isn't necessarily accurate to the show, but oh well.

Take a Break!

Chapter Summary

*cough*RunAwayWithUsForTheSummerLet'sGoUpState*cough*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sometimes Lancer gets ahead of his lesson plans. He usually builds an intentional buffer of a couple days into his schedule, just in case there's an emergency or he's out sick. Every year, he's usually bedridden by *some* sort of minor bug that forces him to miss a few days of class. This year, surprisingly, it seems like he has managed to avoid his annual illness. As nice as that is, he is now faced with a predicament: how to use his extra days.

As his students trickle in before the bell, he glances down at his plans for the day. It's the Thursday before finals week, and he intended to spend this class period helping the students review for their final paper. He had previously written off these unused buffer days as more review for his students, but... they don't need *three* days to review, right? They should be okay with two, given that he's assigning a paper instead of giving an exam, and they've had a few weeks to work on it.

Besides, they deserve a break. Sure, they're about to go on a two-week vacation for the winter holidays, but a brief respite from the stresses of the end of the semester would probably be welcomed by everyone at this point. Including him. Mind made up, he stands and erases the word "REVIEW" from where he has written it on the board.

"We're not reviewing today, Mr. Lancer?" a student asks.

He turns to face his students. Though he doesn't always show it, he does love them all dearly. He'll be getting a whole new group next semester, and he's going to miss this bunch.

"Today is a break day," he says, holding up a finger for silence and trying not to smile when some of them begin to cheer. "Yes, yes, very exciting, I know. We are going to watch a movie. I will write your options on the board and you all will vote for which one you'd like to watch."

He turns to the board. On it, he scrawls out:

"Hairy Potts and the Wizard Rock"

"Zombies Ate My Therapist"

"Your Truth in June"

He changes up the three options every few years and makes a little game of predicting what each semester's batch of students will select. He's only been wrong twice in ten years. These kids feel like a *Zombies Ate My Therapist* group.

It's close— *Zombies* only gets one more vote than *Hairy Potts.* He drops *Your Truth in June* from the running and has the class vote again, and this time the majority is more clearly in favor of cannibalistic dead people than the spoof about failed artists with magic rocks. Decision made, he

pulls down the projector screen from the ceiling and turns to his desktop. Since the teacher's computer is connected to the project and his back is to the projector screen, he can watch the same thing the students are watching while at the same time keeping an eye on the class. He opens ViewTube to search for the movie.

A hand goes up.

"Yes, Ms. Finau?"

"Why is Danny on your Recommended?"

Oh.

Whoops.

Lancer knows ViewTube recommends videos based on what you've watched in the past. Considering the fact that he rarely uses ViewTube and his most recent searches have been for young Daniel's videos, he honestly should have anticipated this happening. He's lucky he told his settings not to track his searches.

"Ehm—"

"Can we watch some of Danny's videos instead?" Kora Smith asks, and Lancer glances at the boy in question. Daniel seems mortified, his face cherry red. His friends openly laugh at him. Aww. Lancer hadn't meant to embarrass him.

"He doesn't seem like he'd be comfortable with that," Mr. Lancer hesitantly responds.

"Yo, Fenton. Please, dude?" says Tino Worthington from the back of the room. "I don't really watch your stuff but ghost tips seem pretty useful." Some other students agree, and Daniel seems surprised by the interest.

"Um..." Daniel looks up at Lancer. His foot jerks like he slipped on something, which would make sense if he weren't seated. Odd. Lancer is about to ask if the boy is alright, but then he blurts, "It's fine!"

"'It's fine'? You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure!"

Lancer stares at him. Daniel leans forward like he's suddenly incredibly invested in what's about to be on the screen. He gives Lancer a strained smile.

"Alright, if you're sure," Lancer says. He asks someone to turn off the lights. Then, he turns back to his computer and opens Daniel's channel. Some students start calling out suggestions, but the first one he hears clearly is a request for Danny's most recent video, so he clicks on it. The title is "How Not To Be Stupid Around Ghosts", and Lancer can guess what it's about. People in this town, himself included, tend not to act rationally around ghosts for whatever reason. He blames panic.

The video opens with a fun little sound effect and Daniel sitting at his desk in his room.

"Hey, y'all! My name is Danny and I do parkour and other things on ViewTube. This video is gonna be one of those other things. Long story short? I'm proving to my parents this channel can be, quote, *educational.* Despite the fact that I was fully under the impression that they knew about

my channel, they recently expressed concern over what I get up to. Which..."

A few clips, presumably from some of Daniel's other videos, flash on the screen. He jumps off of things, backflips off of high places, and runs along fairly precarious surfaces. When the screen rests on his face again, he's bobbing his head in a conceding manner.

"...is a fair concern."

That surprises a laugh out of Lancer, and there are chuckles among the other students as well. The video, as it turns out, is mostly common-sense advice about dealing with ghosts; don't antagonize them, run away from danger, don't try to be Phantom's sidekick, etc. It's presented in part by a series of stop-motion animations and accompanied by Daniel's admittedly amusing commentary. Lancer assumes the "trusted source" that Daniel mentions getting his information from is his parents, though the way he delivers some of the advice makes it seem almost like he has personally dealt with some of the actions he's warning viewers against.

Interestingly enough, Daniel also paints Phantom in a completely positive light. That's... unexpected. Phantom is a pretty controversial figure in the town. Lancer would expect that, coming from a family of ghost hunters, Daniel would share the same hostility for Phantom that his parents seem to harbor. This is not the case. The boy even says it's Phantom's *job* to protect the town. Odd. What would the Fenton parents have to say about that?

The video is in the middle of warning against weaponizing condiments when Lancer hears a sound from somewhere among his students. On a break day like this, it's inevitable that a few of them would do whatever they wanted. There is an unspoken understanding that he wouldn't be as strict about people not paying attention to the "movie", so it's unsurprising that a few students are on their phones or doodling. Dash Baxter dozed off a little while ago, Tyler Wilson in the back is clacking away at her laptop, and Daniel himself... hmm.

Daniel seems distracted in a different way. He's doing something under his desk. With the lights off and students sitting in front of him, though, Lancer can't tell what it is. He *can* hear some quiet sounds coming from over there, though, almost like... growls?

Samantha Manson glances downward at that moment. Daniel is sitting next to her, and whatever is distracting him has now caught her attention. She and Daniel have a quick whispered exchange. On Daniel's other side, Peter Owolabe looks down as well. His brows furrow, confused. After a moment, he purses his lips and turns back to the mess of papers on his desk. He appears to silently decide the situation is not his business.

Tucker Foley, sitting behind Samantha, leans forward to try to peek under Daniel's desk. Then he glances up in Lancer's direction and grins sheepishly upon making eye contact. He whispers to his friends without taking his eyes off of his teacher. The other two glance up as well.

Lancer squints in suspicion. Tucker and Samantha lean back in their seats, feigning innocence. Daniel straightens a little, though his hands are still not visible.

What is this child *doing?*

Mr. Lancer decides to give the kid the benefit of the doubt. Just this once. He honestly just does *not* want to deal with another strange situation right now. The Fenton mystery can take a break for one day. Lancer turns back to the video without comment.

On the screen are images of a metal glove with gems inlaid into it, a decorated wooden box, a sarcophagus, and some other assorted objects. Daniel is discussing the warning signs of ghostly

possession of people and artifacts. It's actually pretty useful advice. Lancer plans to rewatch the video at home to catch the parts he missed. After all, he's already learned from it that salt isn't effective against ghosts. This is quite contrary to popular belief in Amity Park. What other misconceptions does he have?

"This is gonna sound kinda weird," Daniel says in the video. "But here's the last tip: *DO* be nice. *DON'T* let yourself be manipulated by ghosts."

Lancer blinks. "Be nice"?

Daniel goes on to explain that ghosts are people, too, and deserve to be treated as such. According to him, there are just as many "good ghosts" as there are bad, and hostility should not be assumed.

Hmm. Lancer hasn't thought about it like that before. He's never intentionally attempted to be malicious towards a ghost. It's just... well. He hasn't exactly had great experiences with them. He's been overshadowed before. He still doesn't know what the ghost made him do, but whatever it was resulted in the Fenton parents chasing him with weapons around campus and accusing him of being a ghost. Still, though, he supposes it makes sense that not all ghosts are bad.

He can't think of a time where he's intentionally *tried* to speak to a ghost. He supposes there's Dr. Spectra and the Lunch Lady, though he's not sure they count. The Lunch Lady is actually a kindly woman when she isn't enraged and terrorizing the school. He probably should have figured she was a ghost, but he assumed it impolite to ask about the green skin.

Spectra, on the other hand... Spectra still makes his blood boil to this day. He'll never forgive her for causing the widespread depression of the entire school. At the time it happened, he'd just thought the school was severely lacking in spirit, but an anonymously submitted Ghostly Incident Report revealed the truth of the situation. Being a teenager is hard enough. *Intentionally* trying to make them miserable? It's deplorable. Lancer can't believe he almost accidentally vaporized Jasmine Fenton. According to the report, if it weren't for Phantom, Spectra would have succeeded.

The video ends. Lancer has AutoView on, and the next video is slated to start in the next few seconds. In the silence, Lancer can't help but tune in to his classroom again.

The odd sounds coming from Daniel's vicinity haven't stopped.

Mr. Lancer sighs and stands. While he's reasonably certain Daniel is involved in this situation, he doesn't want to automatically assume that he is at fault. He's done enough of that. The boy deserves the benefit of the doubt. Lancer approaches the center of the classroom, and as he gets closer he can hear more sounds. Almost like... whimpers? *What?*

Lancer silently prays that this isn't an uncomfortably inappropriate situation.

"Alright. Who's doing it?" he asks, intentionally gazing around the room instead of looking straight at Daniel.

"Doing what, Mr. Lancer?" someone asks.

"Making sounds. Almost like a..." Lancer searches for an appropriate descriptor, "...like a dog."

A few students glance in Daniel's direction, which only makes him more of a suspect. So much for the benefit of the doubt. Lancer narrows his gaze on the Fenton boy. For what it's worth, he's presenting himself as the picture of innocence. He's sitting quietly, hands folded in front of him. One leg bounces under his desk.

"Mr. Fenton? Is there something you would like to tell me?"

"Me? What would I have to tell you?" he responds a tad too dramatically.

Mr. Lancer stares.

Daniel stares back. The bouncing leg jerks.

And there's a *bark.*

Daniel bites his lip, eyes briefly glancing downwards.

This is somehow the same boy that has staunchly kept the secret of his random injuries for a distressingly long time.

"I'm the one making dog sounds! I've been messing with Fenton all class," Dash says suddenly. He's sitting behind Daniel, and Lancer turns to him. He's wide awake now. He *has* to know his dozing was obvious, right? The effort to cover for Mr. Fenton is still admirable, though. Lancer hasn't seen the two boys interact since Daniel blew up at Dash a few weeks ago. Looking at Daniel now, his jaw is set in apparent annoyance. This was supposed to be a *break* day. Goodness.

There's another low growl. Dash clears his throat.

"See? Dog sound." Dash leans back in his seat and crosses his arms, oozing confidence like that explains everything.

Lancer rubs the bridge of his nose to stave off the tingling that precedes his stress headaches. Daniel would not bring a dog to school. Right? There's no way. He wouldn't. Does he even own a dog? Lancer isn't certain. It's not like he's ever asked, after all. This is getting to be so ridiculous it's actually a bit funny, so he decides he may as well have his fun with this bizarreness.

"Do it again," Lancer says.

"What?" Dash asks.

"The 'dog sound'. Do it again."

If he's going to lie straight to his teacher's face, he better be ready to back it up. For what it's worth, uncertainty only shadows Dash's face for a moment before he shrugs again and sits forward.

"Sure." He clears his throat. Then: "*Grrrr."*

Wow.

It's piteously unconvincing, but Lancer once again has to acknowledge the effort. Next to Dash, Tucker audibly facepalms. There's loud laughter from the rest of the class. Lancer himself has to bite back a smile.

Through the din, another full-on bark comes from behind Lancer. Whatever this is, it's *definitely* originating from Daniel. The laughter quietens. Daniel sits up when Lancer turns to him again. His leg is still bouncing, with the occasional odd jerk. There are more growls and another bark.

"May I please be excused?" he asks meekly.

"What do you think my answer's going to be?" Lancer responds, amused.

"Figures," Daniel says, tone resigned. "It was worth a shot."

Lancer eyes his student for a moment, cycling through explanations in his head that aren't "Daniel brought a dog to class." It could be a phone recording, but then why wouldn't he be trying to silence it? That doesn't make sense. Even if someone is pranking him with a small audio device or something similar, it seems easy enough to look around the area of his desk to try to locate whatever it is, but he's not doing that. It just doesn't make sense that there's a dog in the room, especially because Lancer can't see one. Then again... they do live in a town full of ghosts.

Ghosts aren't always visible.

"Is there a dog in my classroom, Daniel?"

The growls are happening nonstop now, and Daniel's bouncing leg jerks again. The boy grimaces. Lancer can't see anything under his desk except for his feet, but it does look like the pant leg of his bouncing leg is being pulled at. As he watches, the leg jerks again. Lancer can very clearly imagine a dog there, pulling at the jeans and shaking its head. He can tell the exact moment that Daniel decides to just tell the truth.

"...yes," he admits.

"Is it alive?"

Daniel blinks, looking up at Lancer in surprise. "Um. No?"

"You brought a ghost dog into my classroom."

"Well— no, actually. This wasn't my fault, I don't know why he's here."

"You know this dog personally, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's his name?"

"Cujo."

Lancer snorts. How original. "Is it really?"

"Uh, haha. Yeah. Not the most creative, I know."

"Do you have any guesses for *why* he's here?"

"I don't know. He used to be a guard dog, and he was pulling at me like he wanted to show me something."

"I see."

Lancer ponders what to do. It's a break day. Lancer's feeling generous, plus it wouldn't really be fair of him to condemn Daniel for a situation that seems out of his control. So...

"May I meet him?" he asks.

"I— What? Seriously?"

"I like dogs."

"Um... sure?"

Daniel leans down under his desk and comes back up with his hands appearing to grip something invisible. Judging from the space between his hands, the dog is very small, likely a puppy. Now that it's closer, Lancer can hear its quiet panting. The little dog whines pitifully.

"I, uh. I'm not sure why he's invisible. He normally only goes invisible for a few seconds, minutes at the most."

Lancer stares at the empty space between Daniel's hands. "Can I... pet him?"

"Sure, I guess. Maybe move slowly, though? I'm not sure how he'll react. I think he's kinda agitated right now."

Cujo whines again. Lancer reaches forward, slowly as his student instructed.

This is weird.

The sensation of petting an invisible dog is not that different than that of petting a visible one. It's only the added experience of not being able to see the little thing that really changes everything. Cujo's fur is so *soft!* And his head is so small, he's just a tiny little baby! While he seems to be briefly apprehensive, Cujo warms to Lancer and rubs his little head against Lancer's palm. He licks at Lancer's fingers and barks again. His nose, oddly enough, is warm instead of cold. Lancer wishes he could see the wagging tail.

Then, all of a sudden, he can.

The dog that is now visible in Daniel's hands is bright green and so *small.* He wears a spiked collar and has black ears. Lancer falls in love immediately.

"Seriously, dude?" Daniel asks the dog, who merely barks again in response. The boy rolls his eyes with a fond smile and puts Cujo down on his desk. Given slightly more free reign, the puppy decides to playfully attack Daniel's hand.

Daniel refocuses back on Lancer. "So, um. Am I in trouble?"

"No, I suppose not. Just... maybe get Cujo out of here before the end of class, hmm?"

"Yes, sir! That should be doable."

Lancer walks back to his desk to resume playing videos. A few students go over to Danny's desk, asking to pet or play with Cujo. After a few minutes, Daniel lets them take Cujo to the back of the room where he can run around. Lancer can see the heads of six students sitting around the dog in a circle.

A ghostly dog. Wow. The only ghost dog he's ever heard of is the one that destroyed portions of Axion Labs a couple years ago, but the newspaper pictures he's seen of that massive canine look nothing like this adorable little puppy. *Puppy.* It's kinda sad when Lancer really thinks about it. He wonders how Cujo died. Daniel had mentioned he was a guard dog. Cujo seems a little young for that, but Lancer knows very little about training for guard dogs. Maybe they start young.

Had he really been trying to alert Daniel to something? Should they be worried? Hmm. Oh well. Even if he had been trying to show them something, he's long forgotten about it now, if the excited yips coming from the back of the classroom are any indication. Lancer has to refrain from getting up to go join the students.

He *really* needs to get a dog.

Chapter End Notes

What kind of dog, is now the question?
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This chapter was inspired by the following comments on previous chapters (truncated for length):

SurrealSupernaturalist, Ch 10: "Does Danny ever speak to ghosts sometimes?"

AnimationAdventures, Ch 14:"...I'm still interested in a guest appearance by Danielle or Cujo; Danielle could cause some confusion for Lancer, and Cujo hints towards Danny's secret but Lancer could still draw the wrong conclusion because he's a dog..."

Riftid Fox, Ch 14: "...Lancer, good old Mr. Lancer, skips one of his lessons so his students can watch it in the classroom, like, he uses his account, and puts the video in the projector, to 'share with the class' and Danny it's straight up confused and alarmed, because, 1.) His teacher watches his videos, and 2.) he (Lancer) MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT KNOW that he's Phantom..."

A Good Ol' Fashioned Pocket Master Duel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Lancer stands at the front of his classroom, looking out at his students. The borrowed laptops have all been returned. The papers have all been submitted either physically or electronically, and the final follow-up assignment sheets are stacked neatly in the basket at the corner of his desk. After a moment, he loses the fight with his own face and breaks into a small grin. He loves this part of the year.

"So, class," he says. "How does it feel to be done?"

Nathan Knight groans and slumps over onto his desk.

"That. That's how I feel," Spencer Kellin says, pointing at Nathan.

A few others laugh, and some murmur in agreement.

"I'm just glad it's over," Merriam Finau adds. She sits up suddenly, seeming a bit panicked. "I mean. Not that I didn't appreciate you as a teacher or anything. It's just, uh. English is not my best subject."

Lancer is inclined to agree with the self-evaluation but doesn't say as much aloud. Instead, he bobs his head. "That's understandable. Anyone else want to share how they're feeling about the end of the semester?"

He always does this at the end of each semester. He likes hearing his students' opinions. He's also found that group reflection after finals is a good way for students to destress.

"I feel kinda weird," Suzanna Strong drawls from the back of the classroom. "I thought I would be happier that the semester's ending."

Oh. That's unexpected. "You're not happy?" Lancer prods.

"Well, sure I am, since it's all over and I finally get to take the history class I wanted, but... I dunno."

"It's like how the one guy put his friend in a basement for revenge but then he felt weird afterward 'cause he felt bad," says Jason Chin.

That gets a few laughs, and Mr. Lancer blinks. What? The reference is to *The Cask of Amontillado,* which they'd studied earlier in the semester, but he's... not quite sure what to do with it. Jason is prone to wild ideas, but this seems pretty far off even for him.

"You're saying being in my class is like feeling remorse for murder?" Lancer asks. That gets even more laughter.

"I think they're both talking about the feeling of getting into something and being surprised by your own emotions on the other end of it," Peter Owolabe clarifies in his soft voice. "I have experienced something similar."

"Yes! You put words to the thing!" Jason says, seeming excited that someone understood him.

Peter beams in response.

"That's it," Suzanna confirms. "That's what I'm talking about. I wasn't expecting to be bummed."

"Why are you ‘bummed’? I thought you'd be happy to be rid of me," Lancer half-jokes.

"Sure, but you're actually pretty cool when you're not terrifying," Kwan Kiew says. "This class grew on me after a while."

Oh. *Awww* . Lancer decides to take the compliment as is instead of focusing on the idea that Kwan, of all students, finds *him* terrifying. The warm feeling of fondness spreads in his chest, and a grin comes to his face unbidden. "So what you're saying is you're going to miss me?"

He gets a few mumbled, begrudging but affirmative responses. *Yes!* He'll take that as a victory. There are plenty of students who straight-up hate him. As other students share similar sentiments regarding the past few months, Lancer has to try not to cry. He refuses. He gets similar comments at the end of every semester without fail but not nearly to this degree or with this much sincerity. It makes his heart so happy. This group is going to be so much harder to say goodbye to.

Teaching is a very trying occupation. It's times like this when he remembers why he does it.

"It's nice to hear from so many of you," Lancer says, reining the discussion back in. He wipes an errant tear under the guise of scratching at his eye. "You're free to use the rest of class as you see fit, and you may borrow the laptops again if you want. Tomorrow, you all have testing for the other half of your classes. Good luck!"

He sits down to a small chorus of "thank you!"s from his students. He flips over the stack of essays on his desk to preview the first one that was submitted. Samantha Manson. Of course. Easily the strongest writer in his class. He needs to remember to talk to her about submitting some of her work from this year into some literary contests.

He skims the first paragraph. Unsurprisingly, she chose an Edgar Allen Poe poem to frame her paper with. More surprisingly, though, she seems to be using it as a device to delve into her relationship with Judaism. Hmm. Of all things she could have discussed... interesting choice. Suzanna may have had a point about unexpected results.

He puts the stack of essays and follow up tasks into his grading bag for after-school perusal. Then, he takes out his new *Pendragon* book and opens it to the first page. He'd spent *hours* discussing the one Mrs. Focutta gave him. Afterwards, she told him about the series' companion novel, told from the perspective of the titular character's talking axe. He's quite curious to see how it goes.

As he delves into the book, his students start chatting quietly among themselves. He's focused mostly on the words before him, but he makes sure to glance up every now and then to monitor behavior. A few have followed his example and have taken out books to read. Others have checked out laptops from the computer cart. Some have even gone to the supply closet at the back of the room to retrieve some of the board games he keeps specifically for occasions like this.

It'll probably take ten minutes, maximum, for them to start getting loud.

True to his prediction, the collective volume in the room quickly grows. What starts as whispers progresses to speaking louder and louder as students try to hear each other over the growing din. He'll do something about it eventually, but he's also finding that axes apparently have a lot of interesting things to talk about...

He finally looks up again when he sees a streak of pink light out of the corner of his eye. A few

students have started a makeshift game of laser tag with their Pocket Masters. Oh, come *on.* Granted, it's not like the energy has the capacity to damage anything that isn't a ghost... still, though.

He's going to stop them, but he lets himself be amused by their antics for a brief moment. Zander Gutierrez, one of the students goofing off, has their back to Lancer. They stand between the desks of a doodling Peter and a dozing Daniel Fenton. Zander widens their stance and crouches slightly, fingers wiggling in the air above the Pocket Master poking out of their jeans pocket. At the end of the aisle, Kiersten Kieraston stares Zander down. Her fingers are held similarly aloft over her own Pocket Master, tucked away in her hoodie pouch. The scene is a bit reminiscent of the old gunslinger showdowns from the "Old West" movies his father used to watch. He's gotta give these kids one thing; they're creative.

He isn't quite sure how the two of them have decided the timing of the shots since neither of them does the "walk away and turn" routine characteristic of the old movies. Regardless of what the starting signal is, Kiersten suddenly whips out her Pocket Master and fires in Zander's direction. Zander ducks, and the pink energy whizzes over their head. When they hop up and fire back, they accidentally bump into Daniel's desk.

Wow. Despite the jolt, the impact didn't wake Daniel up. His head is buried in his arms, and he's still sleeping soundly. How did he manage to keep sleeping through that? As Lancer watches, a little puff of smoke appears to rise from where Daniel's mouth is lightly resting against his inner arm.

What?

Oblivious, the other students carry on.

"Hey, watch out for Fenton! Both of you," says Nathan, apparently a makeshift referee.

"Wait, why me?" Kiersten asks, frowning. "I'm not the one that bumped into him."

"Yeah, but... your shot. Be careful."

Kiersten scoffs. "Right. You can't seriously believe-"

"Shh!" Zander, Nathan, and several other nearby students watching say at once.

Several of them glance at Lancer in the process. Nathan at least looks embarrassed that Lancer seems to be paying attention. For what it's worth, Lancer isn't *really* paying attention to them. There's plenty to parcel out in whatever just happened between them, but he's more focused on Daniel.

Perhaps it was a trick of the light. Daniel couldn't possibly be the type to smoke or vape or whatever respiratory trend kids are damaging themselves with these days. Right? Lancer supposes it's possible. Few actually "*look*" the type to partake in such activities. But in *class?* Plus, how would he even be doing it? Both his hands are visible, gently cupping his elbows to form a cocoon for his head. Could he really just be holding whatever it is in his mouth?

The longer Lancer watches, the more concerned he grows. Is... is Daniel even breathing? Maybe it's how far away his desk is, but Lancer can't see the rise and fall of the boy's back.

Lancer closes his book. The action catches the attention of a few students who were watching him. Some pretend to go back to whatever they were doing before to wash their hands of the situation, but Lancer still barely pays them any mind. He's going to check on Daniel. The boy's probably fine,

and he's probably not smoking in class because that would be absurd. Probably.

Heh. First an invisible dog and now the smoke that Lancer may or may not have hallucinated. Why does his imagination single out this child in particular?

Meanwhile, the conversation between Kiersten, Zander, and Nathan appears to be heating up.

"*Seriously* , you guys?" Kiersten is saying. "Come on. It's not true. You know that. You *have* to know that."

"I know that you're insane if you think he's faking it," Zander fires back. "It makes perfect sense."

"Um, guys, maybe chill out a little bit," Nathan says nervously, glancing at Lancer again. Lancer stands.

This is clearly turning into an argument, though he's only half-listening because of his focus on the immediate problem of Daniel. He'll deal with them and figure out who they're arguing about in a minute. Still, despite his tunnel vision for Fenton, the other students are in his line of sight and he can still see and hear what's going on.

From beside Kiersten, Dunya Ruhal, who is still seated and also has wary eyes on Lancer, tugs on Kiersten's arm. She murmurs something, though Lancer can't hear what it is. Kiersten gently pulls out of her grip, momentarily fiddling with her Pocket Master. Samantha takes out an earbud and turns around. Tucker, Merriam, Peter, Dash, Suzanna, and some other nearby students turn in their seats as well. Teenagers. Always drawn towards fights.

"He's definitely faking it, and I'll prove it to you right now." She raises her Pocket Master again and aims at Zander's left. At Daniel.

Several things happen very quickly.

Several shouts of "No!", "Hey!", and Kiersten's name come from those who were watching.

Dunya gasps and her hand shoots up, knocking into Kiersten's.

Samantha, Dash, and Tucker stand simultaneously, moving towards Daniel's desk.

Zander shoves Daniel out of his seat.

Kiersten's Pocket Master blast, aim off from Dunya's interference, goes wide and flies towards the front of the room, passing harmlessly through Lancer's chest in the process.

Finally, a *"Yeowch!"* from the front of the room, followed by a thud.

The entire class goes silent.

After a moment, a groggy Daniel from his spot on the floor mumbles, "Wasgoinon?"

Alright. One thing at a time. Daniel isn't dead. Smoking is to be determined, but that can be revisited. Move onto the new problem.

Lancer turns around.

There's a new person at the front of the classroom. If he didn’t already seem out of place, his thick black-framed glasses, plaid pants, black bow tie on a t-shirt and slicked-down hair do the job for him. He's sitting on the ground just behind Lancer's desk like he'd fallen, and he grips his upper left

arm with a pained grimace. He’s entirely black and white except for the blood-like, green substance peeking over and between his fingers. As Lancer watches, some of the substance runs down the ghost’s finger. His paper-white skin seems to pale even further when he lifts up his hand to judge the damage. He puts his hand back down and closes his eyes. Then he looks up and realizes people are staring at him. He looks down at himself.

"Oh, crud," Sidney Poindexter says softly. He flickers out of existence.

Chapter End Notes

Lancer isn't quite sure what to do now, but he feels like maybe he should apologize to the young ghost.

--
Hello! Remember when I said I could get back to a more regular update schedule? Haha, yeah, I do, too. Life has been weird. I'm trying, y'all, but ultimately this is a hobby and there are other things going on in my life. I do still hold myself to the promise of finishing this fic, though. :)

Hope you're doing well! *Also!* I am still taking suggestions for anecdotes or things Lancer notices. This chapter was partially inspired by the following comments/suggestions (some not in quotation marks because I didn't paste them here word for word):

- thefroggyninja, Ch. 9: "i would make it a game to laser point people during speeches, with points for not getting caught, first "blood" and creative placement..."
- Solage, Ch. [Unknown because I forgot to note it down]: Danny doesn't breath while he sleeps
- SurrealSupernaturalist, Ch. 5: Danny's breath fogs while he's sleeping

So that's proof that I definitely pay attention to comments, haha. Also. If you're up to it, share a fun fact. Why not? I like learning things, be it about some weird phenomenon or yourself. LMTYL__Lye commented on one of my other fics about a plastic spider prank war with their dad, which I think is adorable and awesome and I want more stories/facts from people. In exchange, here's a fun fact: I'm a really bad shot with NERF guns. I've missed 5 shots at point blank range before, after which the person proceeded to pick up one of my darts and got me out with it. Not my proudest moment.

Creeper Alert

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the last Friday afternoon of the semester, Mr. Lancer is sitting at his desk grading essays. He fills out the last portion of the rubric for Suzanna Strong, scribbling a "90" in the upper right corner of her paper. After a pause, he draws a smiley face with an arrow pointing to her title. "Gays in Goggles: Finding Freedom in the Water" is quite possibly the best title he's seen all day.

For their papers, each student is tasked with taking any written or performed work (within reason) and combining it with personal anecdotes to make a creative argument about themself or their life. The prompt is intentionally worded very vaguely because he's found through the years that freedom breeds creativity. The sheer diversity of responses he always gets from assigning this paper makes it his favorite student work of the semester to grade. He's not been disappointed yet this year. One student cites a post-apocalyptic novel to describe feeling like a modern zombie. Another uses a poem about leaves to celebrate comfort in online discussion spaces, and a third uses a book about the history of skateboards to talk about stuffed giraffes and an unorthodox childhood. He will never not be amazed by the creativity of teenagers.

Dash Baxter, in what is probably his most impressive work of the semester, uses the short story "There Will Come Soft Rains" to talk about his relationship with technology and animatronics. Apparently, he has a genuine interest in the mechanics behind cars, but he's afraid of letting people know about how deep it goes for fear of ridicule. It's honestly a bit sad. Dash Baxter is a complex child. Despite how he's treated his peers in the past, Lancer can't bring himself to completely write him off. He’s just not sure what kind of intervention Dash may need.

He picks up Suzanna's follow-up assignment. The prompt is much simpler than the one for the essay: "What grade do you deserve in this class?" The answer has very little (if any) effect on their final grades, but he likes the insight on how each student sees themself in relation to their academics. Her answer is short and sweet, as is characteristic of most of her work in his class. In a single sentence, she justifies her A by citing her hard work and the fact that she now "sucks less" at writing. He's going to miss her bluntness.

The next paper on his stack is that of Daniel Fenton. This should be interesting. It seems Daniel has decided to use space as a theme for his paper, which is completely on-brand for him. More intriguing is the fact that he'd chosen *three* works to pull quotes from. He uses the songs "Rocket Man" by Elton John, "Drops of Jupiter" by Train and "Halo" by STARSET to discuss the use of outer space as a symbolic device representing loneliness, loss, and love respectively. This forms a nice transition into what outer space means to him personally: freedom.

It's a pretty compelling paper. On a whim, Lancer decides to go listen to the three songs.

Oh.

Wow.

These are three *completely* different songs. The span of genres is... wide. Yet all three of them seem to mean a lot to young Daniel if the way he writes about them is any indication. He's on his student's explanation for the exploration of love and hope in "Halo" when he hears a familiar bark from the ground to the left of his desk. He looks down.

The little ghost dog from earlier this week, Cujo, sits there with his tail wagging and his mouth open in a canine grin.

"Why, hello!" Mr. Lancer says. He hesitates. He *has* been grading papers for three hours straight. He deserves a break. He'd ordinarily get to the end of the paper first, but... well. He really wants to pet Cujo now.

He stands and strides to his classroom door, pulling it shut after glancing down the hallway. Then, he puts up his makeshift privacy screen over his window. It's just a few sheets of black construction paper, but it's more than enough to block outsiders from looking in. The last thing he wants is one of his colleagues peering in. Not all of them are as amenable to ghosts as the students are.

He sits down on the ground next to Cujo. His knees will definitely punish him for that in the future, but that's not his problem right now. Cujo bounds forward and rests his front paws on Mr. Lancer's knee. He pats at a wrinkle on Lancer's pants with alternating paws.

"You deserve the world," Mr. Lancer says very seriously.

Cujo quickly loses interest in the pants and hops away. He starts sniffing around, bored.

Hmm. Does Lancer have something he can use as a safe toy? He looks around and spots an apple-shaped stress ball he keeps on his desk. He grabs it and tosses it across the room. Cujo yips and gleefully runs after it... but then he doesn't come back. Frowning, Lancer gets up to check on him. Cujo has decided that it is beneath him to bring the toy back. Instead, he is sitting in place and valiantly attempting to fit it into his mouth. *Adorable.*

Lancer picks up the dog and his toy and takes them back to his desk. He *does* still have grading to do, after all. Lancer sets Cujo on the ground near him to keep an eye out.

About a half hour later, Lancer is happy to write a "96" at the top of Daniel's paper. He did a fantastic job, and Lancer can't wait to see the look on his face when he sees his grade. As a teacher, Lancer couldn't be prouder.

Daniel has accomplished so much these past few months. He'd hovered between a C and D through much of the early parts of the semester. Lancer would be lying if he said he didn't notice the boy struggling. He just... didn't try hard enough to help. While he won't ever admit the fact, he's *ashamed.* Other than taking pains to allow Daniel to retake a big test his freshman year, Lancer has done very little to stick his neck out for Daniel or any of his other students.

Between the absences, wrong answers, in-class naps, and harassment from Dash and some of the other A-Listers, it's surprising the kid even managed *that* much. After the intervention of the self-appointed tutors, however, things started getting better. Daniel managed to scrape his way out of the failing zone, clawing in starts and stops up to a high C. This final assignment will be what pushes him to a B-. It's a textbook example of growth... and it had happened largely because of his *peers'* help. Not his teacher's.

Lancer finally sighs and sets Daniel's paper on the graded pile. Not much use stewing over it now. He picks up Daniel's follow-up assignment sheet. He reads. Oh, dear.

"Probably a hard D-, if I'm being totally honest. I wouldn't say I deserve a failing grade, mostly because I'm here more often than I'm not and I do things sometimes, but I'm not that good at school stuff."

The lowest self-assessment he'd seen thus far is a B, and yet Daniel gives himself an *almost failing grade?* Lancer knew he underestimated himself, but this feels a bit concerning. Has the boy not been monitoring his own grades on the grade portal? Is he completely disregarding all the work he put into getting his grade up this semester? He may not be the best student in the world, but he certainly doesn't deserve a *failing* grade.

For the first few months of Daniel's freshman year, he was a model student and carried a sunny disposition. What happened? Puberty? Depression? Some other external factors? Whatever the case, Lancer feels like maybe he should have a few words with him.

A lack of noise manages to snap Lancer out of his musings. Cujo has been growling playfully and making quiet sounds this entire time as he plays with the now-shredded stuffed apple. Now? The toy lies forgotten and cast aside as Cujo stares silently at the classroom door.

"Cujo?" Lancer asks, frowning. "What is it? Is there something out there?"

The little dog growls, standing up. Lancer glances at the door. The privacy screen is still up, so he can't see who's on the other side, but he *can* see the shadows of feet underneath the door. Someone is standing outside of his classroom. His colleagues know to knock to check if he's in there, and the custodial staff have keys and don't bother knocking. That has to mean this is a student.

"Who's out there?" he calls.

No response. Cujo barks at the door, but his tail is no longer wagging. He seems stiff. Wary.

Unease takes up residence in Lancer's gut.

"Hello?" he calls again.

The two shadows under the door shift, move to the left, then disappear. The person is walking away.

Lancer gets up, curiosity overwhelming his growing trepidation. Who would wait at a classroom door and not *do* anything? Did they not hear him and assume the room was empty? Did they tape a note to the door? Maybe one of his students is pranking him... which means he can still catch the perpetrators if he acts fast.

He opens the door and peeks down the hallway. He feels a tug on his pant leg and looks down. Cujo is biting at the fabric and trying to pull him back into the classroom. Hmm.

Lancer looks down the hall.

A girl is walking away. Thick black braids with green streaks woven in cling tightly to her scalp, and her brown skin is almost completely covered by the thick, green winter wear she's decked out in. While it *is* officially winter now, the intensity of the school heating system makes it a bit unusual for her to not at least have taken her coat off.

Cujo runs out in front of him, standing between Lancer and the retreating student almost protectively. Lancer honestly finds it kind of adorable, but then Cujo starts rapidly growing in size. He swells until he towers over even Lancer himself, and his growls have transformed into deep, engine-like rumbles. With a start, Lancer realizes Cujo is the out-of-control ghost dog that the news reported some time ago. The dog releases a deafening bark.

The girl stops walking and turns around.

When Lancer blinks, he's sitting at his desk again. Something is... different. A rough, wet texture rubs at his hand. He glances down. Cujo is licking at his fingers and whining.

"Hi there, Cujo," Lancer says softly, lifting his hand to pet the little dog. "What's wrong?"

Cujo barks happily and noses into Lancer's palm. Then he whines again and hops to the ground, padding over to a seemingly empty corner. He steps forward and appears to bite at and struggle with something in the air. After a moment, Lancer can hear a quiet, whispered:

"No! Stop— beat it! He's fine! Let go!"

That voice...

"Sidney? Sidney Poindexter?"

The voice quietens immediately.

"Sidney, or whoever's there... do you mind showing yourself?"

Silence. Lancer considers the past few minutes. Sitting at his desk, grading Daniel's paper, and Cujo alerting to someone at the door... hmm. He'd probably detected Sidney. Odd change in behavior, though; when Sidney had been on the other side of the door, Cujo had seemed almost afraid. Now, though, he seems perfectly fine in the presence of the other ghost. Then again, it probably just took a moment for the dog to recognize the new presence as friendly.

"Are you still here, Sidney? I, erm... I just wanted to know if you're alright."

"I should be askin' you that," Sidney Poindexter grumbles as he flickers into visibility. Lancer's gaze immediately goes to the young ghost's arm where he'd been injured earlier in the week. There's a grayish spot that looks... off, somehow. It seems a little darker than the skin around it, almost like a scar, but Lancer's eyes keep slipping off of it. He otherwise appears fine, but he's squinting at Lancer with what appears to be suspicion.

"Why would you be asking me that?" Lancer asks. "You're the one who was injured. I... I apologize for that happening, by the way. It looks like it's healed?"

"Mmm. Mostly." Sidney rubs absently at the spot. It wavers unnaturally.

"'Mostly'?"

"It'll be fine in a day or two."

"Oh. That's good."

No response. Sidney just stares at him. Lancer fidgets with his pen.

Tuesday's incident was an ordeal, to say the least. After Sidney disappeared, the class had erupted into chaos. Many students were shouting at Kiersten, who looked mortified that she'd injured the ghost. When Lancer asked her about her anger afterwards, she merely said she'd been "joking around" and hadn't actually meant to hurt anyone. She seemed truly shaken. Lancer pitied her and decided not to report it, but mostly because he feared the Fentons being called in to dispatch Sidney.

The entire incident apparently hadn't deterred the young ghost from returning, though. He's here, and he's just *looking* at Lancer.

"Did I... do something to offend you?" Lancer finally asks.

"No, no," Sidney says dismissively. "You actually changed, so I got nothin' against ya. I just... you feeling okay?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly fine, why? And what do you mean I 'changed'?"

"Er." Sidney looks down at Cujo. Cujo barks at him. "Well. You're better about stopping bullies."

Oh. Lancer is abruptly reminded of how this student died. He winces. How does he even respond to that? While Sidney has pointedly not answered his other question, Lancer feels it's probably not appropriate right now to bring that up.

"Yes. Well. Um." Lancer clears his throat. "I'm trying."

Sidney nods. "That's more than I got from teachers when I was alive. Thank you."

It feels wrong to say 'you're welcome.' Lancer changes the subject.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"Oh! Er." Sidney rubs his arm, breaking eye contact and fidgeting. "Sorry, I was, um. I get real bored sometimes."

"I'm sorry, I'm not very entertaining."

"No, no, you're right as rain. I just... I miss school."

Lancer's heart cracks in half. Sidney apparently misinterprets the look on his face and tries to clarify.

"Well, not really school, because school was where all the rotten bullies were, but I miss learning. The world keeps going all topsy turvy in lotsa different ways. I try to keep up." He hesitates. "And, uh. I like this assignment."

"You like this assignment?"

"Yeah." Sidney shrugs, grinning. "I like reading 'em over your shoulder. You get lotsa bomb stories every semester, and they're always different. It's a riot."

Lancer blinks. "Oh."

Sidney's smile disappears. "I know, creeper alert. I hide ‘cause, you know, people are afraid of me. I can stop if you want."

"No, no, that's fine! I—" Lancer pauses. He was going to say *"I wish you would have said something,"* but how would he have reacted if Sidney had? This meeting would have gone *very* differently if it happened two years ago before ghosts became a permanent fixture in Amity Park life. "Are you here when I'm teaching, too?"

Sidney looks embarrassed to admit it. "Not all the time. I switch up classrooms a lot, to keep things interesting."

Idly, Lancer wonders how hard it would be to enroll a ghost in school. He's already getting a new student at the beginning of next semester, so it's not like it's unheard of at this time of year. Perhaps, if Sidney’s interested... but that’s not a question for right now.

"Do you want to look through some of the papers I've graded?" Lancer asks instead.

Sidney perks up. Interestingly enough, the white glow surrounding him brightens a bit. "I sure as sugar would! You read faster than I do, and I never get to finish."

Way to twist the knife in. Lancer picks up his stack of graded papers. He flips through them, selecting those that aren't extremely personal in some way, and sets them aside. When he's done, he hands the new stack to Sidney, who crosses his legs and hovers in the air above a nearby desk as he starts reading.

Lancer's attention is drawn to the air between Sidney and the desk. The ghost has been floating this entire time... but Lancer had seen shadows of feet under the door. Sidney's shadow is also lighter than a normal shadow, likely because of the light he gives off.

It's probably nothing. Just because Lancer has never seen Sidney stand or sit on a surface doesn't mean the ghost never has. With that, Lancer goes back to grading Daniel's paper.

Chapter End Notes

If only there were already a ghost student attending at Casper High so Lancer could know if enrolling Sidney is an actual possibility.
--
Hello! Tis me with an unexpectedly kinda beefy chapter. Did I shamelessly use three of my favorite songs in Danny's essay? Yeah. I was gonna do one, but I couldn't decide which so all three made it in. Normally I stay away from using "real things" in my fiction (hence "ViewTuber", "Green Bull", etc.) but like. I couldn't resist with this one. I suggest you go check 'em out if you're unfamiliar with any of them.

Also. Man, do I love Sidney. I can never get the way he talks right, though. *HE. DESERVES. FRIENDS.* 3am_updates commented last chapter something along those lines, and I wholeheartedly agree.

I *might* take a break from next week's update. Maybe. I'm not sure yet. I have some personal projects I'm working on. As much as I love this fic, I've been perhaps spending a bit too much time on it. ^_^" At least y'all have tentative advance warning this time?

Keep those ideas coming, though! While this is the last major arc of the fic, that doesn't mean I don't need more to fill the space between plot points. :) Comment what ~spoopy~ thing you think Lancer might notice. Or ghostly shenanigans. Or just things in general. I dunno, I like getting ideas from people.

The Football Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lancer's never really cared for football games. It's admittedly pretty odd, he thinks. He's all for cheerleading and the tremendous work that goes into it, and he's all for the school pep rallys. The games themselves, though? He never experiences anything more than a detached sense of "I want my school to win." As a student, he would roar with the crowd during the rare impressive moment and then immediately go back to chatting with his friends or the other girls on the squad.

As an adult, this hasn't changed. It's the last football game of the semester, which means he cares slightly more than he normally does out of obligation. Only slightly, though. Victories for the Casper High Ravens have always been scarce. He's spent much of this game discussing theories around the soon-to-be-released final *Pendragon* book with Mrs. Focutta. It turns out she has *many* opinions on what might happen, and Lancer loves arguing with her about it. The two of them have their heads bent over Focutta's phone. She reads faster than he does, so he's in charge of scrolling. They're reading through the transcript of an interview with the *Pendragon* series' famed but anonymous author, who has written under the pen name "Will Arnett" for the past decade.

The Casper High crowd suddenly cheers. Focutta and Lancer look up at the snow-dusted field, quickly zeroing in on the lone Raven making his way down to the goal post. He's considerably ahead of anyone else on the field. He may actually have a shot at a touchdown! The interview is quickly forgotten.

"Whoo! *Run,* Ian!" Focutta hollers, waving her little pennant flag.

"Uh oh," Lancer murmurs, spotting the opposing players quickly catching up from behind. Ian is subsequently tackled by one, two, three, *four* guys from the other team. Ouch.

"He almost made it," Focutta says, unphased by the dog pile of teenage boys hiding her student from view. "I'm pretty sure that's a good thing."

"It definitely is," Lancer responds. The other boys peel themselves off of the pile one by one. Ian lies prone on the field. The referee and the medic on standby jog out to the field to check on him. Then, two of his teammates help pick him up and drag him off to the sidelines. He's probably not coming back.

Why does this sport have to be so violent?

"I'm going to the restroom," Mr. Lancer announces.

"Hurry back," Focutta chirps. "Wouldn't want you to miss the end of this riveting, neck-and-neck competition!"

They both laugh. Casper High is down 87 points.

Tiny snowflakes have started falling again. Some of them blow into the open bathroom window, which has a clear view of the football field. As Mr. Lancer finishes up and exits his stall, he can hear the crowd cheering for something. He doubts it's good news for Casper High. Just as he's turning on the sink, though, some of those cheers turn into screams.

"GHOST!" comes a distant cry.

Oh, no. The sky outside the window has darkened to ominous purple. More screams fly through the air as people realize what's happening. On the field, the players come to a stop. Lancer hastens to dry his hands and get outside.

"I AM THE BOX GHOST! RULER OF ALL THINGS SQUARE AND USUALLY CARDBOARD!" The faint but booming voice of The Box Ghost is clearly audible, thanks to ghosts' odd ability to supernaturally project their voices. Lancer sighs and relaxes. This should be over quickly. Most Casper High residents haven't taken this particular ghostly menace seriously in a long time.

Keyword, *most.* Footsteps run by the bathroom. As Lancer looks out again, he can see many of the spectators for the opposite team streaming off of their side of the bleachers. Guests of Amity Park are not as used to ghost attacks, however harmless it may be in this case. He needs to get out there to help with peaceful evacuations, but the more pressing issue at the moment is washing his hands.

When he turns off the sink and looks out the window again, most of the panicked movement on the field and bleachers has stopped. The visiting team's bleachers are almost completely empty, but about half of the Casper High audience is still there. Even the Raven football players are just standing in a semi-circle around Coach Tetslaff. Instead of helping evacuate, she's apparently decided to use the impromptu break to talk strategy. None of them appear to show any real alarm.

After a moment, one of the players trots out onto the field almost directly below where The Box Ghost is monologuing. He yells something up at the ghost that Lancer can't quite make out. The Box Ghost appears understandably confused at being addressed. Living people don't tend to voluntarily engage with rampaging ghosts.

"PUNY HUMAN!" The Box Ghost booms. *"I AM* ALSO *IN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING! I WILL BRING ABOUT YOUR RECTANGLE-SHAPED DOOM WITH THE THINGS YOU LOVE MOST! BEHOLD!"*

Various colored, plastic-looking boxes of various sizes start drifting towards The Box Ghost, each surrounded by a glowing, bluish-green energy. Mr. Lancer squints, trying to make out what the nearest one to him is. Most of them have cords dangling down from them. They range in color, but many of them are black. The nearest one to the bathroom looks like a desktop computer sans the monitor. That over there looks like a mini-fridge, and... is that a game console? This should be interesting. Looks like there's going to be a lot of warranty or insurance claims coming out of this mess.

What remains of the Casper High crowd starts yelling, this time in apparent anger.

"YES! I HAVE CAPTURED SOME OF YOUR PRECIOUS ELECTRONIC BOXES! NOW YOU ARE AT MY—"

A pink streak flies out of the stands, narrowly missing The Box Ghost. He squawks and ducks. Many of the objects floating in the air drop a few inches.

"HEY! SHOOTING AT ME WILL ONLY ENSURE THE DOOM OF THE THINGS YOU LOVE!" Another pink streak flies through the air. *"CUT THAT OUT!"*

The door to the bathroom slams open.

"I'm going—!"

Lancer whips around, belatedly remembering his obligation to the evacuation that clearly isn't happening. Standing in the doorway is Daniel Fenton, cut off in the middle of his declaration (?)

upon seeing his teacher. What just happened?

From the window comes another voice. When Lancer glances over his shoulder, there's another figure in the air with The Box Ghost. Phantom's finally here. But... no. That's not Phantom. This new ghost has green skin, and is wearing sunglasses with a long grey lab coat. His hair is also much wilder than that of Phantom's.

"I, Nikolai Technus, will *not* allow this to happen! Technology is *my* domain! Kindly pass over the electronics and *back off!"*

"Oh." The Box Ghost seems uncertain for a brief moment, before waving his hands in the air. *"WELL, THEY ARE ALSO TECHNICALLY* MY *DOMAIN BECAUSE THEY ARE ALL BOX-SHAPED!"*

"You've *gotta* be kidding be," Daniel groans, drawing Lancer's attention back to him. The boy seems stunned as he stares out the window. Upon making eye contact with Lancer, he stiffens.

"Oh. Right. Ha ha. Um..."

"Mr. Fenton—"

"Sorrygottagobye!" Daniel turns and runs out of the room.

Lancer frowns. In a split-second decision that he doesn't really think through all the way, he follows.

Daniel Fenton runs when there are ghosts around. This is a well-known fact. The more Lancer thinks about this fact, though, the more it doesn't make sense.

How is it that the child who was around when the ghosts started wreaking havoc, who posts videos of himself doing death-defying stunts and exploring unsettling places, who has *ghost hunters* for parents, is the same boy who just takes off at the first sign of ghostly danger? Shouldn't he be used to them by now? Why would the newly-discovered adrenaline junkie be running from action?

Maybe it could be argued that he's just following his own advice from his ghostly defense video and getting out of the way, but to Lancer the contradiction in behavior seems off, especially considering how he had reacted exceptionally calmly when Samantha had been possessed at the lake.

Had he come into the bathroom trying to accomplish something? To find someone?

Wait. *To find someone.*

What if Daniel doesn't run *away* from ghost attacks? What if he's running *to someone?* Someone that can do something?

Lancer bursts out of the bathroom and glances frantically down both sides of the hallway. His right is devoid of people, save for one student sitting idly on the ground. He turns to his left— *there!* Daniel skids around a corner, and Lancer starts going after him.

"Mr. Lancer?" Goodness, not *now.* It's the student sitting on the ground, but Lancer barely spares her a glance.

"I'm sorry, I'm busy right now!" he calls over his shoulder. He briefly considers how this may look to her or anyone else around, but he doesn't care right now. Right now, the only thing on his mind

is knowing where this kid is going.

He hears Daniel's voice call out "I'm going ghost!" and Lancer puts on a burst of speed. Has this child just *actively put himself in danger?* Mr. Lancer turns the corner, feeling a small *whoosh* of air as he does so.

The hallway is empty.

Lancer stares. There are sets of lockers lining both walls and a classroom door on the right. The end of the hall has a sealed window about four feet off of the ground.

There's no sign of Daniel.

What?

This is definitely the hallway he had turned down, Lancer is sure of it. So where is he? He couldn't have gone out the window. It's not made to open, and it's still completely intact. The classroom? It's Saturday, the door should be locked. Lancer walks over to check anyway. Locked, and peering through the window shows no one in the room.

Lancer strides to the end of the hall to check on the other side of the lockers, in case his student is hiding for some reason. Nothing. While the bullies and ex-bullies of Casper High have proved that Daniel can definitely fit into these lockers, there's no one here to close the door on him. What are the odds that he could have unlocked on, crawled in, and closed the door after himself in the seconds that it took Lancer to get over here? Even if that were the case, or even if there was already one open and he just went in, these lockers are loud! Lancer would have heard it slam shut. Unless... maybe one of these locker doors isn't closed all the way? Is he just sitting in one of them, holding the door shut? But then why come here so frantically if he only wanted to hide?

Oh. *A Christmas Carol...* Daniel had said "i'm going ghost." By itself, that doesn't make sense, but maybe there's a comma? "*I'm going, ghost."* So he was talking to a ghost. Are they still here, invisible somewhere, or has Daniel been taken?

That doesn't feel right either. When he'd stormed into the bathroom earlier, he'd started to say the same thing. Was he summoning a ghost? Trying to get it's attention? Was it a specific ghost or a random nearby one?

What does this all *mean?!*

Lancer turns around, baffled but ready to leave. Oh! Standing at the entrance of the hallway is the student that had been sitting outside of the bathroom.

"Mr. Lancer?" she asks, looking confused.

"Sorry, young lady, I was... busy." He internally grimaces. "Busy" doesn't cover running around a corner and spinning in a circle. She probably saw him chasing after Daniel, too. How did this look to her? Goodness, this is awkward. "You needed my help earlier?"

"Busy doing what?"

That's what he was afraid she would ask. He waves it off and approaches her. "Oh, nothing important. What did you need me fore?"

"You were following Daniel," she continues. She cocks her head slightly to one side. "Why?"

Embarrassment gives way to suspicion. Lancer squints at her. Thick black braids with bright green streaks woven in cling to her scalp and taper down her shoulders. Her green parka has snow on the shoulders, which means she just came in from outside. Lancer knows he can't be familiar with *every* student that goes to Casper High, but he feels he could at least recognize a student face if he saw one. He's never seen this girl before. Yet, she knows his name, so she can't be from the other school.

She also said "Daniel" instead of using his nickname. That's not something he's ever heard a student do.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"No, you don't know me yet," she says. "I would have introduced myself today, but you've just added another variable to the equation of you, Mr. Lancer. I will ask again: Why did you follow Daniel here?"

Lancer instinctively wants to take a step back, but he also knows the hallway behind him is a dead end. There's nowhere for him to go except past her.

"I think he might be in danger," he answers honestly.

"Ah. You intended to protect him?"

"I..." Protecting the boy had been the last thing on Lancer's mind. He was concerned, yes, but he really just wanted answers. The thought fills him with shame. "I don't know."

"Hmm." She regards him for a long, uncomfortable second. "You 'don't know'? Or is the answer 'no' and you're merely too embarrassed to admit it? You've been quite taken with him recently, though I can't fathom why."

This time, Lancer actually does step back. Has she been following him? He remembers belatedly that she had been sitting on the ground outside of the bathroom. Waiting, it seems, for him.

She seems surprised at his movement.

"I've alarmed you?" she asks. Instead of being apologetic, she just seems curious. "Now, is that because of your current excited state, or is it because you have keener senses than I thought?"

What? How is he even supposed to answer that? When he does nothing but stare at her, she chuckles and shakes her head, taking a few steps back. "Apologies. Too many variables to answer useful questions right now. Sorry to bother you."

She turns and walks away. "I'll see you soon!" she calls over her shoulder as she turns left and out of Lancer's line of sight.

After a brief, stunned moment, he strides to the end of the hallway entrance to follow.

Follow?

He looks both ways. There's no one down either side. No one to follow... strange. He's not sure why that word is even on his mind. Maybe he'd heard something and thought it was Daniel.

Lancer spends about fifteen minutes fruitlessly searching the halls for his student anyway. Eventually, he gives up and returns to the football game.

The sky has returned back to its normal color. The game seems to be on pause as players from both teams work together to pick up bits of wire, plastic, and other debris from the snow-covered field. Portions of both the Casper High spectators and the visiting team's audience are trickling back into the bleachers. As Lancer approaches his seat, he searches through the assembled people.

There. A few rows down, Samantha Manson checks her watch with a frown. Tucker Foley cranes his neck and seems to be searching through the moving mass of people. Are they looking for their friend? Mr. Lancer should alert the Fentons that Daniel has possibly been taken by a ghost, but he doesn't have their number and the front office is a much longer walk. He makes a detour to start heading towards the two students.

Then, Daniel appears and collapses into the empty seat between his friends. Lancer stops. He watches as Daniel briefly lets his head fall over the back of his seat. His friends lean in, appearing concerned. Samantha pats him on the leg. He shakes his head 'no' in response to something Tucker says and idly looks around.

When he makes eye contact with Lancer, he freezes. Nervousness immediately captures his features.

Sensing something amiss, Samantha and Tucker turn to follow his gaze to where Lancer is standing. Tucker waves. Samantha frowns. She turns back to Daniel and says something. Whatever his response is is enough for Tucker's smile to disappear, replaced by open-mouthed shock. All three of them are staring at him now.

Well. Okay. Daniel's fine, apparently. This... this is too much for one day. Mr. Lancer wordlessly turns to rejoin Mrs. Focutta at their seats.

"You missed all the action!" she says without looking up at him. "The Box Ghost and that tech ghost from a while back showed up and had a pissing contest over a buncha computers and stuff, and then Phantom..."

She trails off when she finally looks up at him. "What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost." She chuckles at the overused joke, but frowns when he doesn't join in.

"Edward? Are you alright?" she asks softly.

"I. Yes," he says, finally sitting down. "I'm just... confused."

"About?"

He wants to tell her. He wants to tell her everything about the "Fenton mystery," about the things he's noticed about this child, about the incident from just now. He trusts her. Maybe she could help him make sense of all this.

Yet, just *thinking* about how he'd even start makes him feel like some sort of deranged child stalker. He can't say anything. Not until he knows for certain what is happening.

"I... Will Arnett hasn't let anyone interview him in five years. Why now? Is he trying to give us a clue?"

Focutta brightens at the mention of the author. Of course she has a response at the ready. She pulls out a list of authors she suspects may include Arnett's full identity. Lancer chuckles at her excitement and pushes the baffling Daniel Fenton out of his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise, surprise, Casper High lost the game. At least Lancer got to talk about the new *Pendragon* book, though.
--
Does anyone know who Will Arnett is? :)

So part of the conflict in this chapter was inspired by the following comment:

- **UmbraDeNihil, Ch. 17**: "The way the box ghost finally succeeds at scaring Amity Park. Stealing his precious boxes and dropping the contents from great heights, i.e. Xboxes, playstations, televisions, and the like, just crashing into the ground becoming semi salvageable parts."

Literally I read it and instantly fell in love with the idea, lmao. I'd also like to thank "Zela_Night9Phantom" for reminding me last chapter about the atmospheric changes during ghost fights! Though I didn't quite use your idea, I definitely had it in mind. :)

Fic is getting closer to the end~ While I am still asking for what else you think Lancer should notice about Danny, I'm also now adding onto that and asking: **What other videos could Danny do?** He started out taking dares, and I think he's still doing that. He also does the building exploration and parkour stuff. BUT! There's other things he can do! His channel is kinda all over the place, so if you have an idea then like. Give it to me!! Ultimately, the "Danny the Viewtuber" series should be about Danny and his video shenanigans!!

Also! Please send good vibes to my beta! She's sick. :(

That's One Way To Deal With Insomnia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are sounds coming from somewhere in the school.

At first, Lancer thinks nothing of it. Even though it's Sunday evening on the second week of the winter holiday break and the school should reasonably be empty, there may *still* be a couple of teachers milling around. It's just like when he found the football team practicing in the weight room a few weeks ago. Nothing out of the ordinary. He locks his classroom door behind him and turns to leave the building.

But... hold on. What *are* those sounds? They're like... distant yelling and faint impact noises. Even when the entirety of the football team was training, he hadn't been able to hear them from his classroom. And it's almost midnight during *winter break.* There shouldn't be *nearly* as many people as it sounds like there are.

He eyes the binder in his hands, the reason he'd come to the school tonight in the first place. He wanted to start reviewing his lesson plans for the rest of the semester, but he'd put off coming here because of a *Dead Teacher* movie marathon that had only just ended.

He can still leave. He can ignore the sounds and pretend he didn't hear anything. Yet, if these are students who have broken into the school to roughhouse and cause trouble...

Mr. Lancer sighs, already turning around. The quicker he gets this over with the sooner he can go to bed. He flips open his binder and retrieves the three detention slips he'd lazily stuffed into it forever ago, and he digs a pen out of his pocket.

His ears take him to the doors of the gymnasium. He glares at the ominous cloud of purplish smoke oozing out from beneath the doors. Is that a fog machine or drugs? Both? Are they having some sort of party in there? The *nerve* of these children sometimes! He loves them to pieces but they also have a tendency to try his patience. He straightens and slams the door open, a reprimand ready on his tongue.

The House of Mirth!

Ghosts!

Actually... of course it's ghosts. Why hadn't he thought of ghosts?

There are dozens of them around the room. Many of them hover above the pulled-out bleachers in lieu of sitting, chatting and watching the game. One purple-robed individual with blue skin and a clock in his chest sits alone, with glowing letters in the air above him reading “Time Out Corner For Cheaters With Time Powers.”

Most of the ghosts are on the court, floating anywhere between the ground and the ceiling. Ember the rockstar ghost wields her guitar like a bat, a near-feral grin on her face. Sidney Poindexter triumphantly hefts a ball in his hands above his head. Little Cujo somehow manages to hold a ball bigger than he is between his jaws. The Box Ghost and that tech ghost from the football game are squabbling over a ball near the center of the court. A mass of meat who can only be the Lunch Lady has several balls sticking out of her form.

The hunter ghost Skulker has what looks like a ball-shooting canon hefted over his shoulder. He aims it carefully before firing at an unfamiliar young ghost in swimming trunks. A skeletal shark next to the boy growls a warning, and the boy squeaks in surprise before a hole appears in his stomach. The ball passes through unimpeded, and it closes as he puffs out his chest proudly.

There are some other unfamiliar ghosts on the court as well. A mouthless pink-skinned individual in a trench coat, fedora, and red sunglasses slinks around the floor. A serious-looking man with black gloves, whose skin matches his white coat, has a whistle perched between his lips. A cyborg woman with a red eye hovers over there near the ceiling. There are floating blobs, stray animals, and many, many more...

... and as Lancer walks into the room, every single one of them quickly notices him and turns to stare in shock.

'Ghosts play dodgeball?' is the only coherent thought he has, before a dodgeball cuts through the air and nails him in the face.

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Ow.

Pain.

What...?

Voices.

"... not apologize... too much..."

"... he dead...?"

"... could get Spectra...?"

"NO!"

Ow. Loud. The loud volume of several protesting voices snap him back into some degree of

coherent throat, and Lancer groans. What just happened?

"He's waking up!"

"Awesome. I will take my leave, then."

"Wait, who are you? You're not a ghost."

"Has she been here the entire time?"

"Goodbye!"

"Wait, hold on, *who* —"

"Leave her be. She is... strange."

"...I still think this human needs a doctor."

" *I'm* a doctor. Technically."

"No, Spectra."

Something pokes his cheek. "I haven't seen a living person in so long..."

"Hey! Quit that!"

"Sorry for hitting you, human! I panicked."

Lancer opens his eyes. Through his blurry vision, he can see several shapes leaning over him. His face hurts. The back of his head hurts, too. He closes his eyes again.

"Now is he dead?"

"Wh— No! Y'all, listen, just back off. You're gonna freak him out."

"Can I stay?"

"Sure, Sidney. The rest of you, uh. We gotta take a rain check on this, I guess."

“Fine. I, Technus, will accept our victory and take my leave.”

“ *Your* victory?! That was a draw at best! I am The Box Ghost and I call foul!”

“That’s not even what a foul is, you *dolt!”*

There’s the sound of voices bickering. Lancer opens his eyes again, and this time his vision is clearer. Oh! That's Sidney over there, wringing his hands nervously. Phantom is here, too. And others. *Yayyy!* Maybe? Or maybe he's in grave danger. *Oh nooo!*

"Mr. Lancer! Are you okay?" Sidney asks frantically.

"Mmmmm, I don' th’nk s’?" Lancer responds honestly. The words don't quite come out right.

A wet, sandpapery texture rubs at his hand, and he hears a whine. Puppy... Cujo? Good dog. Lancer pats the furry head and gets a happy yip in response.

"Relax, he's probably fine," says a deep baritone from farther away. Lancer can't tell who the

speaker is, but they sound like a smooth saxophone on a rainy day.

"Speak for yourself, Skulker! You can't get traumatic brain injuries anymore!" Sidney says, scowling. He pauses. "Can you?"

"This entire situation is giving me a traumatic brain injury," grumbles a female voice out of Lancer's line of sight.

Lancer sits up. He promptly vomits onto the ghost next to him.

"Oh. That's... awesome," says Phantom, staring at the mess on his lap.

"Might need to rethink that brain injury thing!" chirps an unidentified voice.

"You know... about brain injuries... I'm a brain doctor. Technically."

"*NO, SPECTRA!"*

Sidney makes a stressed sound and gently pushes on Lancer's shoulders. Lancer gladly takes the hint and lies back down. A small weight appears on his lap. Four pressure points. Paws? Cujo. Good boy. Pats for the good boy. Pat, pat. Lancer stares at the ceiling. It's spinning. He shuts his eyes.

...

When he opens them again, he's staring at the night sky. The top of Amity Park Regional Medical Center looms on the left side of his vision, and a black man in scrubs leans over him with alarm on his face.

In the ensuing half hour of waiting, tests, and questions, Lancer's mind keeps going back to one thing:

The young boy with the shark ghost. He'd just... made a hole in himself to let an object pass through. Just like it looked like Masters had during his demonstration of Pocket Masters earlier in the school year. He struggles to muddle through the events of the evening thanks to the concussion, but that one connection *will not leave him alone* . Well, that, and the worry that the school's meat supply has been tainted by dodgeball flakes. He should probably hold off on eating the burgers for a while.

Goodness. Concussions. Never again.

Chapter End Notes

That *Dead Teacher* marathon was completely worth the concussion, though.

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Hey, y'all! A couple announcements:

- I changed my pseud, if you didn't notice. Doing some rebranding. ^v^
- Poll: If you commented an idea and I end up writing it as a oneshot, should I gift the fic to you? I'm leaning towards yes, but I also want to hear y'all's input. How would you like me to let you know I wrote your idea?
- ***Please* keep commenting video ideas for Danny's channel!** I literally love them and y'all are so creative!! I have the rest of this fic pretty much set in stone, but if you come up with something else Lancer could notice then feel free to comment it. It might end up in a standalone. :)

This chapter was inspired by the following comment:

- **Josh Spicer on Ch. 18:** "Maybe Ember pops in randomly with Youngblood doing some shenanigans and defending either Sydney or the other kids from the A-Listers (who are still jerks, not the ones who are named) and Lancer notices them and realizes that he now has to adopt all of them"

I know it's kinda nothing like your idea but the train of thought was: Ember and Youngblood doing shenanigans --> the young ghosts all doing shenanigans --> the young ghosts having a dodgeball game --> *all* the ghosts having a dodgeball game. So, uh. Yeah.

That's all! I've fixed up my buffer again so the *plan* is that y'all won't be getting another unplanned several-week hiatus. Thanks for sticking around!

EDIT 8/14/2020: I can not *believe* I forgot our favorite doggo Cujo would also be concerned about Lancer! Added in the good boy.

Mostly Ghostly, Time To Roast Thee

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Jack and Maddie Fenton walk into Mr. Lancer's classroom on the first day of the spring semester, his eyes immediately go to their son.

He hadn't forgotten the conversation from back in November, when he'd held the boy after class and grilled him about the source of his injuries. Two months later and Lancer is still worried, but he can't really *do* anything unless Daniel opens up to him. It's a frustrating, heartbreaking situation to be in. Despite what Daniel said, Lancer's main suspects are the parkour or the parents.

That being said, nothing is setting off any alarm bells at the moment. Jack Fenton waves enthusiastically at his son, who pretends not to see it. Daniel currently just seems annoyed. Maybe embarrassed. Nothing about the way he's acting right now seems incredibly alarming. Then again, Lancer isn't really sure what behavior he should even be looking for. If the Fenton parents *are* the aggressors in the "mysterious injury" situation, it's not like they would do anything to their son in a room full of people.

He doesn't want to think they'd hurt their son. They're reasonably nice people. Sure, they've shot at Lancer, captured him, and threatened him on at least two separate occasions, but that's only because they thought he was being possessed or controlled somehow. That near bloodthirsty fervor is reserved only for ghosts... right?

Hopefully.

Daniel currently seems unaffected by his parents' presence. In fact, he's not even looking at them. He’s instead staring down the new student, CeCe Knowles, as she walks over to the empty seat next to Ms. Valerie Gray. Curiosity is to be expected. Mid-year transfers aren't common at Casper High. Granted, Daniel seems less curious and more... uncertain? His expression is stuck somewhere between a confused frown and a squinting glare. Lancer isn't quite sure how to label it.

The fixation is a little odd, but it's not Lancer's priority right now. Ms. Knowles takes her seat, and Mr. Lancer clears his throat.

"Settle down, everyone. Today is not going to be a normal class day."

The students had almost certainly guessed that by now. It's not every day that two adults in brightly-colored jumpsuits visit the classroom, even if most of the students had probably seen the Fentons around town. If the Fentons' presence isn't enough of an indication, then the two dollies parked at the front of the room with heavy-duty plastic totes on them are an obvious clue that today would be more than just learning about the stars. He still has to make the declaration.

It’s a new year and a new semester, with a new student, a relatively new batch of kids, and a new astronomy curriculum. Announcements are a given. Plus, what’s not to love about stating information in an overly official manner?

Granted... not all announcements are fun. He has to carefully keep the disgust from showing on his face as he holds up the avocado green index card given to him to read off of. There are several brown stains on it, and they're *sticky*. Judging by the fact that Jack's gloves were *also* sticky when

they shook hands earlier, Lancer suspects he knows the culprit. That doesn't make him any happier about having to touch it. Plus, the stains are in the way of the writing! How is he supposed to read this?

"As you all may know, this, er..." He squints at the letters. "...this is Maddie Fenton and Jack Fenton. They are our town's resident experts in anything green, glowing, and goth-ly." Gothly? That doesn't make sense. "Oh, sorry. *Ghostly.* They're here to give a... lithe... ledoor on..."

The Scarlet Letter! He can't do this. He turns to the Fentons, lost. Why couldn't they have introduced themselves?

"I'm sorry, what does this...?" he whispers, gesturing to the card. They're across the room, though, so it's more like a stage whisper. Some of the students giggle.

"We're here to give a little lecture on ghosts and clear up some misconceptions!" Mrs. Fenton chimes in smoothly, as if her intervention was planned from the start. Mr. Lancer surreptitiously trashes the index card and squirts copious amounts of hand sanitizer on his hands.

"That's right!" Mr. Fenton adds. "We're also Danny's parents. Heyo, Danny-boy!"

"Hey, Mom and Dad," Daniel says, sounding almost reluctant to acknowledge them. A few more giggles sound in the room. Lancer has to feel a little sorry for the boy.

"Speaking of Danny," Mrs. Fenton says, seeming oblivious to her child's mortification. "There's a certain, ah, *video* that he uploaded to his ViewTube video channel last month. Some of that information is a bit inaccurate, so we thought we would address that today as well so y'all don't have the wrong idea."

This sets off a chain of whispers in the room. Daniel looks pained. Apparently noticing this, his mother smiles sympathetically.

"We've had this discussion before, but we thought it was only fair to let the people who watch your video know, too."

Daniel sighs, mumbling something under his breath and leaning over to get something out of his bookbag.

"What was that?" Mrs. Fenton asks, tone somehow both threatening and kindly.

"Nothing, Mom, I love you!"

"Love you, too, sweetie."

Lancer turns and tugs down the projector screen for the Fentons, searching in his email for the requested presentation as his mind races. Was that a noteworthy interaction? Was there actual hostility there, or merely a standard parental scolding of a disgruntled teenager? He has no idea.

When the presentation is loaded and he turns back around, Jack Fenton is holding a long stick with a cartoonish gloved hand pointing forwards at the end of it. He seems very excited to use it. Is the same man capable of this level of glee at a silly pointer stick capable of harming his own son? This is so *difficult.*

The Fenton parents start their talk with a short but informative lecture on the physiology of ghosts, trading off at seemingly predetermined points. Certain concepts are emphasized with images on the board that Mr. Fenton redundantly (but enthusiastically) gestures at with his pointer.

The two of them have historically been mocked by the people of Amity Park for their antics. Yet, despite the tangents the two of them seem prone to going off on, and despite how ridiculous Jack Fenton looks with that pointer stick, the both of them very obviously have a clear, deep understanding of the subject matter at hand.

The Fentons share that ghosts are "odd manifestations of ectoplasmic energy and post-human consciousness." They can change their appearance at will, though most ghosts maintain some degree of the appearance they had in life. The corresponding presentation slide to this point shows two side-by-side images of a red-headed woman. The left image is a simple headshot of the smirking woman in a red blazer, and is captioned "Dr. Penelope Spencer, PhD." The right image is a slightly blurry still of a familiar ghost, grinning cruelly at someone or something out of the shot. Spectra. The only real differences between the two photographs are her jagged teeth and gray skin in the right image.

Mr. Lancer shudders. He can't believe she had been near students. He can't believe *he* allowed this woman to be near students.

Faint echoes of " *No, Spectra!"* clang around in his head. The ghost dodgeball night from the middle of winter break... what would she have done to *him* had they let her near him?

According to the Fentons, ghosts are inherently malicious creatures with a burning hatred and jealousy for the living. The more powerful ghosts are primarily motivated by some sort of obsession, which is often centered around a theme. The most common obsession is power. Ghosts tend to vary on how they seek to fulfill their obsession.

"It's our job as researchers, as scientists, and as ghost hunters to know more about these ectoplasmic entities," Mr. Fenton says, tapping a small blob ghost on the screen with his pointer. "They're fascinating beings, but— and here's where our Danny-boy was wrong— they *can* not be and *are* not your friends. Even if you think so, they ultimately just want to use you in some way."

The slide changes to an image of a shark and a ghost with an equal sign between them.

"People are afraid of sharks, but they aren't really *evil,"* Mrs. Fenton says. "It's largely the same with ghosts, even though it's a bit more complicated. They hate the living, but they can't *help* that. It's in their nature!"

Mr. Fenton lifts something out of one of the totes. It looks alarmingly like a bazooka, and he braces it on his hip triumphantly. Several students gasp or exclaim in surprise and awe. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't know how to take 'em down when we need to!"

Lancer frowns. He'd actually been really enjoying the presentation... until now. This last point doesn't sit right with him. The idea that Cujo, that *Sidney,* inherently hates him? That they want to use him? Cujo, the sweet little puppy, and Sidney, the lonely bullying victim who just wants to keep learning? That doesn't make sense. Cujo is a *dog,* for goodness sake!

Then again... if ghosts are as cunning as the Fentons are suggesting, then maybe Cujo and Sidney just have him fooled. They'd be good at what they do, right? The thought of it really, truly *hurts.*

"And finally: ghosts are *not* just people you can talk to! My sweet, sweet Danny said in his video that ghosts are people, just like us..." Her voice hardens. "But they're not. Don't make that mistake. Don't get emotionally invested. Danny did say this: *don't* let them manipulate you."

Lancer notes a few students turn to watch Daniel's reaction to this. For what it's worth, he seems to be fuming. He doesn't verbally disagree with his parents, though, and the Fentons move on.

Mr. and Mrs. Fenton spend a short while explaining the purpose of some of the gadgets they'd brought with them. There's also some images of lab equipment that Daniel had apparently taken, which they go over as well. A belt designed to shock ghosts that try to overshadow the wearer, special headphones made for blocking out ghostly interference, an ecto-filtration system... some of the items seem to be normal objects with the Fenton name slapped onto them, but others are genuine marvels of technology.

The presentation changes to the last slide, where a yellow question mark with a poorly edited image of a ghost sitting on it graces the screen.

"Any questions?" Mr. Fenton asks. He points with his pointer at a raised hand.

"I'm Suzanna. What about Phantom? He's a hero. He tries to keep the town safe."

"Oh! I'm so glad you asked about Phantom," Mrs. Fenton chirps brightly. "Phantom is *quite* the interesting ghost. It pretends to be a hero, which has made things difficult for us in terms of figuring out exactly what its obsession is. But! We finally did crack it: *dominance."*

Mr. Fenton picks up. "For *some reason,* that pesky Phantom claimed Amity Park as its territory a couple of years ago. Now, ghosts can be territorial. Many of them stake claim on a place to haunt in the real world, but these places are usually just buildings. Phantom, on the other hand, takes it to a new level! Not only does this ghost claim *all* of Amity Park, but it fights to keep certain other ghosts off of that turf."

"That doesn't make him a hero, though," Mrs. Fenton adds. "Be careful how you use that word."

"But he *saves* people!" Suzanna protests, seeming genuinely upset.

“Yeah, like him or not, Phantom does a lot for the town,” adds Wes Weston, another new addition to the class this semester.

"Honey, the people of Amity Park are part of that turf to this ghost," Mrs. Fenton says gently. "It's only protective to the extent that it can keep what it sees as its belongs under its control."

"A *fascinating* case if you really think about it!" Mr. Fenton chirps. A scowl momentarily darkens his features. "That doesn't make it any less of a nuisance, though."

Suzanna crosses her arms and leans back in her seat, her displeasure obvious. She doesn't argue again. Wes frowns and wiggles a pencil back and forth between his fingers. His movements are also agitated.

“My name is Valerie. Do y’all work with the Guys in White?” Valerie says after Mr. Fenton points at her.

Mrs. Fenton scowls. "The idiots in white have *no* respect for scientific integrity! Ghosts are dangerous, yes, but those dimwits don't seem to understand just how few of them bother coming to the world of the living to *harm* people! That technology ghost, for example. Its obsession is power, and more specifically in this case it wants world domination. If it hurts people, who is it going to dominate? That's just not in its best interest. It won't going to attack you unless you're in its way. The GiW don't even bother *attempting* to recognize that nuance! They just want to destroy all ghosts, which is preposterous!"

Mr. Fenton chimes in. "They call themselves a 'paranormal investigation division' but they refused to believe that ghosts were real until they *saw* one, despite all the evidence we'd been showing the world for years! *And* they bought our home and tried to destroy our life's work with a giant

missile!"

Mr. Lancer, now hiding behind his desk, uses the break in the rant to ask: "Mr. Fenton? Could you please put that down? Please?"

The entire class is also hiding beneath their desks and other furniture in the room in an effort to avoid potential fire from the large, blaster-looking thing Mr. Fenton had picked up and started waving around in his anger. Mrs. Fenton, noticing this, gently takes the thing from her husband and pats him on the shoulder. Mr. Fenton clears his throat.

"Anywhoo! The Guys in White are not our friends," he finishes.

Valerie hums thoughtfully in response, but doesn't add anything else.

CeCe raises her hand. The motion is oddly aborted as her hand doesn't go up all the way. After a moment of brief struggle, she pulls some of the electric-green-streaked black braids out of her parka hood and shrugs the thick coat off. Free from the restraining article of clothing, she puts her hand up properly.

If she's not originally from Amity Park, then this must be a *heck* of a first day so far. The poor girl. Mr. Lancer mentally apologizes to her. He may need to take her aside and explain some things after this.

Mr. Fenton aims the pointer at her.

"I'm CeCe," she says flatly, voice just as level as when she'd introduced herself to the class earlier. "Do you call ghosts evil because they don't align with your idea of good?"

Mrs. Fenton blinks. "Well, I... No, we explicitly said they're *not* evil. Just inherently malicious."

"Interesting."

Silence. The initial question had Mr. Lancer expecting a follow-up inquiry or elaboration from CeCe, but none come.

"Was that... it?" Mrs. Fenton prods after a moment, clearly with the same expectation.

"Yes."

"You weren't going to say anything else?"

"You asked for questions. Anything else I have to say on the matter is fact and not question, so no, I don't have anything else to say."

Oh. Er. Okay. Lancer genuinely can't tell if she's from Amity Park or not. It's not impossible for her to have gone to another Amity Park high school or have been homeschooled or something, which would explain her nonchalance regarding ghosts. At the very least, she seems just as unhappy with the Fentons' lecture as some of the other faces around the room.

"Um.... Alrighty, then!" Mr. Fenton says, moving on. Mrs. Fenton glances at the clock.

"We have time for one more question, kids!" she chimes.

Another hand goes up.

"Yes, young man?"

"Hi. I'm Spencer. Y'all said you don't hunt all ghosts, just the ones that are causing trouble to people, right?"

"Well. Not explicitly, but yes. Ghosts are our focus of study, after all." Mrs. Fenton answers.

"If they're not an active threat then we have no reason to rip them apart molecule by molecule!" Mr. Fenton adds in a tone that is *entirely* too chipper.

"Neat. So, my mom died in a car accident six years ago, which sucks, *but* she's also a ghost and she still bugs me about homework. She gets annoying sometimes, but she's not like. Evil or out to get me or anything."

Um. *What?* He's... Mr. Lancer has spoken on the *phone* with Mrs. Kellin before! She's always concerned about her son's grades! And she's been dead this entire time?

Half the room is staring at Spencer, who shrugs. "She's still my mom."

"You... live with a ghost?" Jack Fenton says slowly.

"Yeah. It was kinda weird at first, 'cause we were still like. Grieving her or whatever? She came to her funeral and got all fussy at the dress they put her in. Said she wanted to be in a suit. But anyway. Finding out a family member was a ghost was pretty weird, but in the end we still love her and that's *all that matters."*

The last part is said with an odd intensity, like someone had challenged him on this point or there was something he was trying to communicate. Lancer's still reeling from the fact that he's spoken with a dead woman on the phone. On *several occasions.* He hadn't even known ghosts could talk on the phone! Well, now that he thinks about it, there's probably nothing *stopping* them, but... this is ridiculous, why is he still thinking about this?

Mrs. Fenton's expression is sympathetic. She pauses before speaking. "Spencer, honey... that's probably what this ghost *wants* you to think. But this sounds like a situation involving a long-term plot—"

"She's my *mom!"* Spencer protests incredulously. "She's literally the sweetest person I've ever met in my entire life. She wouldn't hurt a fly!"

"Yes, that may have been true when... she was alive." There is clear hesitation in Mrs. Fenton's words, like she doesn't want to upset Spencer, but she presses on anyway. "I know this is probably hard to hear, but that ghost isn't your mother anymore. Admittedly, I've never observed a ghost lying in wait for so long, but—"

"No. You're wrong. Look, I know you've been studying this your entire lives or whatever, but you can still be wrong and you're *definitely* wrong about this."

Mr. Fenton speaks up. "I know this is probably hard. You have an emotional connection to this ghost, and you don't want to believe it would do you any harm, but—"

"Did you just call my mother an *it?"*

"Alright, alright," Lancer intervenes, keeping a nervous eye on Spencer. He's standing now, and he looks *furious.* The boy isn't generally a trouble maker, but he has an occasionally nasty temper and a few fights on his record. The last thing he needs is to get in trouble again. "Spencer, do you need a moment outside?"

Spencer spends another moment glaring at the adults at the front of the room. Then, he sits back down with a huff and crosses his arms, refusing to make eye contact. "No. Sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Fenton."

It's obvious he doesn't mean it.

Lancer scans his class, gauging emotions. Many of his students look uncomfortable or are staring at Spencer or the Fentons. A couple of them seem angry, and others he can't get a read on.

Daniel Fenton appears... shaken. His hands are palm up in front of him and he stares at them, brows furrowed like he's never seen his own hands before. Lancer had missed something. *Drat.* He'll pull Daniel aside after class. This has to mean something, right? Unless it wasn't something his parents had said that's making him act like this? He may be reacting to Spencer or one of the other questions...

There's a long moment where no one, adult nor student, is certain what to do next. Then, a hand goes up.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Fenton says. "We don't really have time for—"

Mr. Fenton gestures with the pointer. "Oh, come on, Mads, we can probably squeeze in one more."

"I'm Merriam. I don't really have a question, I just wanted to say thank you for coming to our class today! Your lecture was pretty informative."

"Yes, yeah, what she said! Thanks a lot. It was pretty helpful, um, even though— I mean. It was helpful. So thanks! Yeah. I'm gonna, um..." Nathan trails off into a mumble.

Mr. Lancer thanks whatever deity is up there for students like them. Merriam hadn't seemed interested for much of the lecture, but Lancer suspects she and Nathan are trying to dispell the tension in the air. It pays off. A chorus of "thank you's" ring out in the air, though many of them sound reluctant. Both Mr. and Mrs. Fenton beam regardless.

"Thank *you* ! It was so nice coming in to talk to all of you," Mrs. Fenton says.

"Use your Pocket Masters responsibly, now, kids!" Mr. Fenton adds, as the two of them begin packing their equipment back into the crates.

When they leave, barely ten seconds pass before the bell rings. There's a flurry of movement and chatter as students pack up to go to their next class. A few of them go up to Daniel, though Lancer can't hear what any of them are saying. The boy fake smiles and nods or shakes his head in response to some of it, offering a few brief words. As soon as his bag is packed, though, he speeds out of the room. Samantha and Tucker exchange concerned glances, before jogging after him as Tucker calls for his friend to wait up. Lancer had completely forgotten to ask Daniel to stay after class.

Oh, dear.

Chapter End Notes

> Lancer's not quite sure how to bring up the "So you live in a town full of ghosts" conversation with CeCe.

—

Poor Danny. Identity crises are not fun. In other news, though, this has been "ZombieMerlin dumping tons of headcanons about ghosts into a chapter." XD Don't worry, there's more coming next chapter.

This chapter was inspired by the following comments (truncated for length):

- **NahNah, Ch. 9:** " ...Jack and Maddie could make a guest appearance to teach classes about ghosts! Filled with horrible facts and biased opinions..."
- **Potkanka, Ch. 12:** "...Well, Jack and Maddie are definitely going on Lancer's list about Danny, aren't they? Will he suspect domestic violence now?..."
- **Theshycreeper, Ch. 19:** "...Lancer could notice maybe something with how danny acts with his parents or how oddly strong and jumpy he can be..."
- **bellringer53, Ch. 19:** "How about danny does a lab tour ..."

While Danny doesn't actually film a tour of his parents' lab, that comment is the reason why he's the one that took the pictures of his parents' equipment. :)

ALSO. I've been meaning to give Val and Wes more screentime in this fic. Now it happened! Yay!

Also the chapter title doesn't really make sense but I came up with it and I adore it so it got put in. XD Chapter count is once again bumped up by one, and I think that's where it's going to stay. For real this time. *Maybe.* I'm playing with an epilogue idea, so jury's still out on that.

Thank you to the DP Fanfiction Palace Discord for some of the questions the students asked as well as the idea about a student with a ghost relative! :) Y'all are awesome.

Live in 5, 4, 3, 2...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's not like Mr. Lancer hasn't ever watched a live video before. He's watched news broadcasts, after all. He's listened to the radio, and he watches the occasional sports game on T.V. when there's nothing else to watch.

A ViewTube live video is a different experience entirely. It's mostly the live reactions from the people in the comments that throw him. It feels strange to reading (or deciphering) people's reactions instead of seeing or hearing them in real time when he's not in the same room as them.

He stumbles upon Daniel's livestream by accident. He'd been looking on ViewTube for a supplemental extra credit video about Jupiter's moons when he saw a notification off to the side letting him know about a video he may be interested in. "*LIVE:* Q/A with Actual Ghosts!" it reads. A cartoony version of his student Daniel Fenton's face is in the thumbnail. Curiosity gets the better of him.

The stream has clearly been underway already for some time, judging by the time counter in the corner of the video frame. The video itself shows Daniel in a room with several ghosts. Lancer isn't quite sure, but he would *swear* that the room is an old operating room in a hospital. There are a few medical instruments on the floor in the lower corner and part of what looks like an upended surgical cart.

Daniel is sitting on a ragged-looking patient bed with broken green straps hanging down the side of it. A blanket separates him from the grimy surface of the questionable mattress. Dust and debris are strewn across the floor. There's also a gaping black space in the wall off to the left. It looks like it's supposed to be there, what with the few panels of the smooth inner wall that he can see, but Lancer can't for the life of him figure out what it is. It's large enough to fit the hospital bed into it. He's also pretty sure he can see a flash of purple lights under the bed Daniel is sitting on, though that could have been his imagination.

While Daniel's sitting cross-legged on the bed, his companions seem plenty comfortable on the motley assortment of other furniture in the room. There are five ghosts in all, in various spots around the room but within earshot of each other, Daniel, and the camera. On the far left of the screen, lounging in a dark green beanbag chair, is a green-skinned woman with long black hair. She's in a blue top that exposes her midriff, and she has metallic purple bands and bangles on her wrists and upper arms. The thick, swirly tail that ghosts sometimes have curls up to her like a mermaid tail.

Seated on the ground next to her is Sidney Poindexter. Despite the two-cushion couch behind him, he apparently decided to opt for a seat on the floor, with his head leaning against the mystery woman's lap. She absentmindedly cards her fingers through his hair as she listens to Daniel, and Sidney's eyes are closed like he dozed off.

The third ghost is The Lunch Lady. Her rocking chair is floating a couple of inches off the ground, and she seems to be rocking back and forth in the air without having to push off of the ground to do so.

Seated at an ornate table next to her is another unfamiliar female ghost, also with green skin. She wears a long-sleeved light blue and green dress. She's younger than the first woman, appearing

closer to Sidney's age. She perches primly in her high-backed chair and has a blue cloth band around her head. The table in front of her has an inkwell and quill on the far left of it. A few green-tinted, parchment-like sheets of paper with curled ends are strewn about the makeshift desk. She's holding one in her hands, though her eyes are on Daniel.

The last ghost is the oddest one. He has purplish-pink skin and red glasses. He wears a fedora the same dark gray as his coat. He also *doesn't have a face.*

The ghost is holding a tea cup in his hands, and he occasionally tips it towards his completely smooth, featureless face. Can he even drink it? The tea cup is upside down along with him, so why is the liquid inside of it flowing out of the cup and *upwards?*

Goodness. Ghost logic.

Maybe Lancer could take a break from his work... he really shouldn't. He has to update his lesson plans. These first few weeks of the new semester have been a lot more work than normal, since he's more used to teaching core classes and this is his first time teaching Astronomy. It's a whole new fight to find the balance between engaging the students who are genuinely invested and also maintaining the interest of the students who are just using the class to tick off an elective requirement.

He'll leave the stream open. He opens it in a new tab and lets it play as he continues what he's doing. He's only really actively tuning in every once and a while, but he does learn some information as well as what names are associated with which voices. Desiree, Dora, and Amorpho are the ghosts he doesn't recognize.

The questions from the chat touch on a relatively wide range of subjects. Favorite pastimes, ghost pop culture, the biochemical logic of ectoplasm, "ghost" stories, social media... Daniel's viewers apparently have a lot of questions.

Another half hour later, Mr. Lancer reaches a reasonable pause point in his planning. The next few weeks are now properly re-outlined, and most of the rest of the semester has been tentatively filled in as well. Pat on the back, Edward. He leans back in his chair and sips some grape juice from his thermos as he opens a new tab to check his email. With his attention wandering, his ears tune into the stream again.

"...kind of a heavy question, so you don't have to answer if you don't want to. But..." Daniel hesitates, as if unsure if he should proceed. "'stronkstrong' wants to know: if given the chance to get what you truly want, would you move on?"

There's silence for a good ten seconds. Lancer frowns. Did the stream freeze? He switches back over to the stream window.

It's not frozen, but the ghosts are all quiet. Sidney is no longer lounging against the side of the woman— *Desiree's*— beanbag like he had been when Lancer originally tuned in. Instead, he's sat up ramrod straight. Desiree herself seems conflicted, lips pursed. The younger female ghost— Dora— seems uncomfortable, and The Lunch Lady's mouth is twisted in a deep frown. And— Goodness, Lancer hadn't noticed it before, but there's now some sort of large, leathery, semi-humanoid creature curled up on the bed next to Daniel. Daniel drums his fingers absentmindedly on the side of its head. It blinks slowly, almost sleepily, with glowing purple pinprick eyes occasionally pearing out of gaping black sockets. It doesn't appear to be looking at anything in particular. Before Lancer can puzzle *that* out further, Amorpho speaks.

He seems uncharacterstically somber. This entire time, he's been joking around with a dry, nasally

monotone. He would occasionally make a one off-comment that hinted at an unspoken conflict, but this is the first time he's actually completely sobering up.

"Most ghosts eventually gain an idea of what they want or need to move on," he says softly. "It's often tied to obsessions. I, um... heh. I have nothing. I don't know. And while I *love* to play pranks and have my fun... if given the opportunity to end that misery, I would probably do it."

Oh.

With the exception of the odd creature by Daniel, the other occupants of the room look just as stunned as Lancer feels. Until this point, the stream has already showed that ghosts are much more like humans than Lancer initially thought. They have hobbies and hopes and frustrations and fears, and are not just the one-dimensional creatures of anger the Fenton parents had painted a picture of. The spectrum of complex emotional capabilities kinda *has* to include sadness and pain by definition. Still, seeing that play out *Amorpho,* the one ghost who has been joking around the most this entire time, is a bit jarring.

Finally, Dora speaks. "Do you wish to know?"

"What?" Amorpho asks. He flips right-side up. The tea floating upwards abruptly falls to the ground.

Desiree seems to catch on. "Do you *wish* to know?"

"Wait, you can *do* that?" Daniel asks, sounding stunned. "I mean, I guess you can, but— *can* you?"

"I can try. I don't always have full control over the outcome, but I do have *some* influence. That is especially true in this case, since I'm not creating something out of thin air.

There's something Mr. Lancer is missing here. He suspects it's related to Desiree's abilities somehow, or perhaps the other ghosts in her social circle, but he's not 100% certain. What he *does* know is that whatever choice Amorpho's being faced with at the moment, it's not one that he's weighing heavily on.

After another second, he nods.

"Yes. I do. I wish I remembered who I was, who I *am."*

"So you wish it, so it shall be," Desiree says almost automatically. She waves her hand in the air. Swirling light blue smoke appears, and then... nothing. There's no visible change to the room, but Daniel and the other ghosts are all staring expectantly at Amorpho.

Amorpho just floats in place for a few long, silent seconds. Then he says, "Take it back."

"What?"

"Take it back. Undo the wish. I don't want this."

"What—"

"*Take it back!"*

"I wish for you to undo the wish you just granted Amorpho!" Daniel says.

Another cryptic phrase, another wave of smoke, and things still don't seem any different.

"...Amorpho?" Sidney asks quietly.

"Hmm?"

"Are you... alright?" Dora prods.

"I'm peachy!"

"Um..." Daniel says. "Do, uh... do you wanna talk about—"

"What other questions you got, kid?" Amorpho interrupts.

The Lunch Lady reaches out and grabs Amorpho by the edge of his coat, dragging him closer. An undignified squawk escapes his mouthless face as he is crushed into a hug. He flails. Eventually, though, he settles down on the arm of The Lunch Lady's rocking chair with a grumble and doesn't pull away. Daniel worldlessly moves onto the next question.

What just happened? If he's spent so much time mourning his lost identity, what the heck? What could he have possibly remembered that was so terrible?

Hmm. Well. Ultimately, Lancer supposes it's no one's business other than Amorpho's. At the very least, if this little session has shown one thing so far, it's truly that ghosts' primary emotion *isn't* anger or vengeance or powerlust or any of the other things ghosts attacking the town seem to be attacking for. These five seem just like people.

The Fentons said all ghosts are malicious towards the living, that everything and every way they present to humans is an act. Would they still say that entire thing with Amorpho just now was an act? With the other ghosts seeming *concerned* for him and wanting to help him? Would the Fentons argue it was just the ghosts uniting to put on a convincing front for the audience?

A few weeks ago, Suzanna brought up Phantom at the Fentons' lesson. CeCe said something or other about the Fentons condemning all ghosts as malicious for not fitting some definition of good, and Spencer shared a story about his dead mother. Is there actually a distinction between "inherently malicious" and "evil" like Mrs. Fenton had suggested? And, if so, is it even fair to say these five fit in either of those categories?

What about the ghosts at the dodgeball game? Were they not just having *fun?* Even if Spencer's mother is "acting," even if Phantom is "acting," even if these ghosts in this stream are "acting"... the ghosts at the dodgeball game had no one to put on a show for except for themselves. If their every action is driven by jealousy and hatred of humans, then why had so many of them seemed so happy right before Lancer walked in?

The ghosts in the stream all seem comfortable with Daniel. If they can be civil to him, why should he be the exception? He can't possibly be the only human they're "good" around, right? The argument could be made that they're playing nice since he's the son of ghost hunters, but *what about the dodgeball game?* While Lancer's memory of the aftermath of getting hit are spotty, he does recall several of the other ghosts vehemently protesting letting Spectra near him while he was injured and vulnerable. They were protecting him. Heck, they'd even brought him to the hospital! Wouldn't beings biologically geared to hate him have no incentive to do anything resembling kindness? None of that sounds "evil" or "inherently malicious." It just sounds like, at least some of them, cared that she may have worsened his condition.

How does anyone ever really determine "goodness"? Fake personalities exist, after all. Television actors and celebrities no doubt have very different public and private faces. Arguably, a person is

only ever really their true self unobserved behind closed doors. Have the Fentons seen *any* ghosts behind closed doors?

Besides, "good" has always been relative to the person who uses the word, and history has a very long track record of victors viewing their opponents as "not good." Maybe even malicious, to use the word of the Fentons. The sheer range of human variation means that no one is every really one hundred percent "good" in relation to others, doesn't it? At least for adults, someone will always disagree.

Reducing ghosts to nothing but mindless creatures with nothing but jealousy and malice as their primary motivators? That's not right. Not when the five ghosts in front of him are clearly showing the capacity to reflect, to feel, to laugh and mourn and complain and *care*. Those are human drives. And that means that Jack and Maddie Fenton are at least partially wrong about ghostly behavior. And sure, maybe these ghosts are putting on a show for the camera, and maybe they're the exception rather than the norm... but as Daniel and his guests on screen laugh at something a blushing Sidney just said, Lancer makes up his mind.

Chapter End Notes

~~Lancer has decided: Sidney is hella baby and should be protected at all costs.~~
--

Hey, y'all. Long time no see. The pandemic has made things hard, plus classes have started up, so apologies for the delay. This fic will be completed, I will tell you that. :)

How's it going? Lemme know. I don't mean with the fic, I mean with you. Life's hard right now. Tell me how you're feeling.

"I can see you running..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr. Lancer is in the copy room losing a fight with the stubborn old copier the administration *refuses* to replace, when his teacher sense start tingling.

He pauses the storm of mutinous curses he'd been raining down on the stupid machine to look up and around. He's alone in the room, which is why he'd been perfectly fine with uncensoring himself for a short while. He gives one last petulant kick at the sorry excuse of a machine before removing the sheets of paper he'd been trying to copy. The copier makes an angry grinding sound in response. Screw you, too, then. Regardless, Mr. Lancer takes the hint and turns to leave.

He heads towards the exit, passing by the glass door through which he can see the conference room beside the main office. In it are Daniel Fenton and two men in white suits, black boots, and black gloves. One of them is a bald black man, and the other is an older white man with a brown moustache. Who are they? Lancer can't tell. They look vaguely familiar...

Oh, well. He doesn't really care about that. What he *does* care about is the fact that Daniel looks incredibly uncomfortable. He sits stiffly in his chair, shoulders set in a tense hunch. His arms are crossed in a way that seems casual, but his fingernails dig harshly into the muscle just above his elbow.

It's impossible for anyone to be happy or comfortable one hundred percent of the time, and Daniel is no exception. He obviously doesn't want to be in that meeting, but it may be important nonetheless. Yet, despite that logic, something about this situation is still rubbing Mr. Lancer the wrong way.

He has no reason to doubt these men. He doesn't even know who they are. Perhaps they're some form of CPS? Mm. No. That's unlikely. CPS certainly doesn't do uniforms like those, and he's also reasonably certain they wouldn't be acting so stoic and expressionless to a child they suspect is in need of their services. No, this situation is something else entirely, and Mr. Lancer's gut is saying that whatever it is may not be good. Where this dread is coming from, he isn't sure, but he's willing to risk acting on it this time around.

He strides towards the conference room. He pretends he doesn't hear the front desk secretary calling his name and instead opens the door. The three occupants of the room turn to him in surprise. One of the suited men moves his hand towards his waist almost on instinct, towards a lump at his belt line. Lancer goes cold. They have *weapons?* Is this some sort of a law enforcement situation?

"Daniel? Are you skipping out on detention?"

Daniel looks up at Mr. Lancer, confused. The poor boy. "Detention?"

"Yes. The lunch detention you were assigned earlier this week."

"I— *What?"*

Lancer walks further into the room, ignoring how the two men frown and praying Daniel won't ask anymore questions. He squeezes his student's shoulder gently upon arriving next to him, hoping it's reassuring. Daniel just winces instead. So much for that.

The moustached man speaks up. "Sir, we were in the middle of—"

"I'm sorry, I don't really care what you were in the middle of," Mr. Lancer interrupts. *Farenheit 451,* he hopes he's not getting himself *and* Daniel into trouble with this stunt. "This boy has a punishment to serve, and he will serve it for the rest of the week now since apparently he can't even be bothered to remember it."

Moustache starts to protest again, but the other man holds up a gloved hand for silence.

"That's fine. We can appreciate the value of punishment," he says coolly. He smirks. "After all, students need to know what is right and wrong. They don't get a free pass just because someone *says* they should."

He looks directly at Daniel as he says this. Lancer wants to get this child out of here *now.*

Mr. Lancer clears his throat. "Yes. Exactly. Come along now, Daniel. I'm sorry gentlemen, I'm afraid you both will have to find some other time to speak with him."

"That's fine. We can be going now," the bald man says. He and his partner stand, and he pulls a small black card out of his pocket. As the two of them start to leave the room, he presses a small black card into Daniel's hand.

"We've had our differences, kid, but I think you'd make a great addition to our team. Especially if you know something about those 'halfa' things the entities in your stream brought up. Think about it, hmm?"

"I already said I'm *good*," Daniel responds lowly. He stares directly into the man's sunglasses and tears the card in two, crumbles the pieces, and tosses them towards a nearby trashcan. He misses because he's not looking where he's throwing it. Moustache notices and poorly suppresses a snicker. The bald man smirks as well, which only seems to infuriate Daniel further.

"Let's go," Mr. Lancer prods, hand on Daniel's shoulder.

After another second of glaring, Daniel backs down. He turns wordlessly and picks up the pieces of the card to properly throw them away. Then, he follows Lancer outside the conference room.

Anticipating questions, Mr. Lancer lowers his voice when they're a short distance away and says, "Don't say anything until we get back to my room."

Daniel nods. They exit the conference room and make the journey back to Mr. Lancer's classroom. It doesn't escape his notice that the two men linger by the front doors of the school, watching them go.

As soon as the classroom door is shut behind him, Mr. Lancer turns to his student.

"Hey, Mr. Lancer, um... Sorry for forgetting, but. Um. What, uh... what did I do?"

"Nothing," Mr. Lancer says, walking back to his desk and taking his seat. He watches the window as a large white van with *"GIW"* emblazoned on the side peels out of the parking lot.

"Okay?" Daniel says slowly. He takes off his bookbag and slides into a chair across from Lancer's desk. "What *didn't* I do?"

"No, no, it's— you haven't done anything wrong. You don't actually have detention."

"Oh."

Silence. Daniel clearly wants to ask more questions, but seems like he's afraid of pushing his luck. Lancer appreciates the chance to gather his thoughts. He thinks he made the right call getting Daniel out of that situation, but he hopes it doesn't come back to bite them both later.

"Are your arms alright?" Mr. Lancer finally asks, spotting a little smear of red by Daniel's elbow where he'd been digging his fingers earlier.

"What?" Daniel blinks.

"Your arms. Are they alright?"

"Uh. Yeah, why wouldn't they be?"

Daniel had rubbed his arms a bit when Lancer asked the question. A streak of smeared red disappears under his shirt sleeve. Lancer frowns.

"It looks like you're bleeding."

Daniel finally pulls his hand away from his arm, looking at his slightly bloodied fingertips.

"Oops. Uh, right. I picked at a scab."

Hmm. Must have happened while Lancer wasn't paying attention. "Do you need a bandage?"

"No, I'm okay." Pause. "So, if I don't have detention... can I go?"

"Well— hold on. What did those men want you for? Are you alright?"

"Oh. Um. They're the Guys in White. They've been around town in the past. They do ghost hunting stuff, and uh. They wanted to offer me an internship. Said I have a *'unique set of knowledge.'*"

The Guys in White. Lancer vaguely remembers the Fenton parents railing against them in the 'ghost hunting lesson' from a few months ago. They wanted to offer Daniel an internship? Did Lancer make the wrong call here and pull this boy away from an opportunity? The look on Daniel's face says he would rather do anything else but accept their offer.

Plus... 'unique set of knowledge.' They definitely have that right. Despite running away from ghost fights at the first possible opportunity, he seems to be much more comfortable with the glowing beings than anyone else in the entire town. That *includes* his ghost hunter parents.

How does he know so much, anyway? The easy answer would be his parents, but he'd disagreed with them over at least a few things. That has to mean he's operating from a different base of knowledge than they are, so where exactly is that knowledge coming from?

"Mr. Lancer?"

"Yes? Ah, right, sorry. They invited you to an internship, but it doesn't sound like you're interested."

"Got that right! They're fruity for Froot Loops, so I guess... thanks for saving me? With... detention? I'm not really sure why you showed up, but I appreciate it."

Lancer nods rather than trying to explain the sense of dread. "You're welcome. Can you answer one last question for me, though?"

"Sure?"

"How *do* you know so much about ghosts?"

Daniel's expression shutters. Crap. "Oh."

"I don't mean to be intrusive, I was just curious. I know your parents are ghost hunters, I doubt either of them would have been able to pull off a Q&A with ghosts. How did that happen?"

"You saw the stream, too?" Daniel asks, seeming surprised. "Wow. Um. Thank you? I guess that makes sense that they're popping up for you since we watched one of my videos in class a while ago, but, um..." He trails off.

He's avoiding the question. That's nothing new. Lancer had seen as much coming as soon as the question left his mouth. It's fine this time, he supposes. It's not like he really needs to know the answer. He's really just scratching that residual itch of that "Daniel Fenton mystery" that he thought he'd abandoned weeks ago.

"...can I go *now,* sir*?*"

Lancer glances at the clock. There are about 20 minutes left before the end of lunch. Daniel needs to hurry if he wants to make it and have enough time to eat.

"Yes, of course."

With the dismissal, Daniel hops up and practically runs from the room. He's closed the door and disappeared before Lancer notices the old purple bookbag slumped at the foot of the chair where Daniel was sitting. Oh well. He'll come back for it.

Lancer spends a few quiet minutes dejectedly shifting through study review sheets he'd failed to copy during his epic battle with the copier. He supposes he could just scan them and put them on his website, but—

"Hello, Mr. Lancer."

"Animal Farm!"

He startles back, hand clutching at his chest at the unexpected sight of a person standing in front of his desk. CeCe Knowles cocks her head to the side, seeming surprised.

"I startled you? I'm sorry. You looked busy."

Chapter End Notes

> Lancer's "mysterious student" quota is already filled, so he really doesn't need to add another one.
>
> —
> This chapter and the next were originally one chapter, but I decided to split them for reasons. If it feels like it got cut in the middle of a scene, that's because it did. XD This chapter doesn't really feel like my best and I probably should have waited to post, buuut. Oh well.

I have a couple assignments that are due tomorrow morning as well as 60-something pages of reading to do in the next... three and a half hours? Oh, wow, that's actually not that bad. Normally I procrastinate a lot later than this, maybe I can actually get it done for once? We'll see.

This chapter is the first of four that all take place one right after the other on the same day. It's a big day, y'all.

I'm still taking video ideas for Danny, and I'm still reading comments about how y'all are doing. :) Comment them both! Kudos if you know the song the chapter title is from, though it admittedly may be a bit too vague at the moment.

"...Running every night from the same darkness..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I startled you? I'm sorry. You looked busy."

"Yes, but..." How did she get in here so quietly? The door creaks when it opens, and the linoleum tiles aren't exactly quiet. He must have been really lost in thought. "Well. It's alright. Have a seat."

"Thank you." She makes herself comfortable in the seat Daniel had been in, shedding her thick green parka and hanging it over the back of her chair. She spends a moment fingering the fluff of the hood. It's a very nice, warm-looking coat.

It's only getting odder and odder that she's still wearing that thing around. They're moving into the middle of March. Sure, the last of the frost only melted away last week, but the past few days have been sweltering. The only times it seems she ever takes the thing off is when it impedes her from doing something else. He's asked her about overheating in the past, but she just shrugs it off. What made her shed it this time? The answer doesn't really matter, he supposes, but he's curious.

He smiles. "What can I do for you? How are you adjusting? Are you making friends? It's been a while since I checked in with you. I know this town is... odd, if you're not from around here."

She cocks her head to the side, her default reaction to being surprised or confused. "Why do you ask? Are you concerned about my academic performance?"

"No! No, you're doing just fine in class." Her grades aren't spectacular, but she maintains a high B. "I only wanted to offer my support."

"Why?"

"You're my student. Why wouldn't I care?"

She does this a lot, too; asking about his motivations for things that he doesn't usually think twice about. It used to worry him. Now, he's just accepted it as one of her quirks. There isn't a single student at Casper High who isn't strange in some way or another. CeCe fits in just fine.

"Oh, alright. Thank you, then."

Goodness, her old school must have had very different standards for teacher behavior. Checking in with the kids you teach is a bare minimum, both for being a teacher and just being a decent person in general. It's not the first time that he's wondering what school she's coming from, but *what* school is she coming from?

"Why did you become a teacher, Mr. Lancer? It certainly isn't because of the pay."

Oh. She wants to become a teacher? Memories of his long, sinuous journey to becoming an educator trickle his thoughts. He glances briefly at the clock, contemplating how much detail to share. Fifteen more minutes until the end of lunch and his students return to finish up fourth period. That's not a lot of time to have a deep heart-to-heart about his connection to the teaching profession, and she probably isn't searching for that deep of an answer anyway.

"I enjoy literature and talking about literature," he says. "I thought I would become a teacher to try

and spread some of that joy. I also like hearing you students' perspectives and helping you all grow as writers. That's still true even though I'm not teaching English this semester."

"You like watching us grow. So you're aware, then, of the power you have in students' lives?"

"Of course. That's kind of the whole point of being a teacher." He chuckles. She doesn't smile back.

"*Outside* of teaching, I mean," she presses. "The more interpersonal influence. The standing by and watching bullying happen. Punishing victims like they're at fault. Holding students after school to satisfy petty grudges. I'm curious about how you currently reckon with the actions and inactions of your past."

Oh.

What?

How...?

How would she even *know* about any of that? She only got here at the beginning of the semester, and that was long after the climate of bullying at this school had started shifting for the better. Did she hear about it from other students? Why is she asking him about it? What does she expect him to say?

He tries to come up with a good answer. There isn't one. She stares at him, hands folded on the desk as she waits. There is no accusation in her tone, no judgement in her expression, and yet he feels like an insect pinned under a microscope.

He was part of the problem. He *knows* he was part of the problem, but he’s trying to be better about it. What more can he possibly do other than that? Is he supposed to feel guilty for the rest of his life?

He clears his throat. "Every teacher learns as they progress through their career, and, um. I have... made mistakes in the past. I've been more recently made aware of my own behavior, and, er... well. We're all growing."

CeCe nods thoughtfully. "Mm. So it really was the news segment, then? That changed everything? That seems like such a silly, simple little thing, and yet it seemed to have a profound impact on the entire school."

Wh— He hadn't even *mentioned* the newscast. Had she been around for that? She definitely wasn't a student at that point, but she's speaking like she's been here since at least last fall. Maybe her family had moved into the area and decided to just wait for the new semester to start? Yet, this part of Amity Park is just small-town enough to be very aware of new residents. If CeCe and her family had been around for long before she started school, he definitely would have heard about it. It feels almost like she just appeared out of nowhere...

The door opens. "Hey, Mr. Lancer, sorry, I forgot my— oh."

Daniel. Probably back for his bookbag. He seems initially contrite, like he feels bad about interrupting, but then his eyes flicker between Mr. Lancer and CeCe. He frowns.

"Whatcha doin'?" he asks, failing miserably at sounding casual.

"Hi, Danny! I had some questions for Mr. Lancer. What about you?"

Oh. Hmm. He's aware of code switching as a phenomenon, but... CeCe speaks to Daniel in a way that is *completely* different than how she refers to Lancer. Her tone has shifted from aloof and semi-formal to something much more chipper. It's a bit jarring, considering the gravity of the conversation before Daniel walked in.

"I left my bag in here," he says. He's still looking between CeCe and Lancer with something like suspicion. Apparently he doesn't like whatever conclusion he comes to, because he narrows his eyes and adds, "I *also* just realized I have a question for Mr. Lancer, too."

"Oh, sure! In that case, ask away. I expect to take a bit... longer."

"Nah, you can go ahead. I can wait, and plus you're really smart. I might learn something."

CeCe's bright smile briefly falters, and she and Lancer watch as Daniel walks across the room to retrieve his forgotten bag. He sits in a desk two seats away from CeCe and turns to glare at her.

Did something happen between them? Now that he thinks about it, Lancer can't actually recall seeing CeCe hanging around any other students outside of class — not in the hallways or in extracurriculars or anything of the sort. While she's admittedly not around him all the time, he's quite certain he has seen each and every single one of his other students in *some* sort of interest activity.

"Why don't you forget about your question for now and come back later? This is kind of private."

"Oh, okay, sure..." Daniel frowns. "No, wait. Nope. No can do."

CeCe cocks her head to the side, frowning. "I said *forget* and *leave."*

"And I said *no."*

"Daniel!" Mr. Lancer interrupts, appalled. What has gotten into him? Why is he acting like this? He has been occasionally stubborn about things in the past, sure, but never downright *unreasonable.* Everyone has a right to privacy... plus, if this conversation continues down the same path it had been going, then Mr. Lancer doesn't really want Daniel here for this either.

"I promise I'm not just being a jerk right now, Mr. Lancer... uh. Ok, maybe I am. But it's for a good reason!"

"Please don't fret, Mr. Lancer," CeCe says, turning to him and smiling. "If you could just relax for a moment? Just until I fully address this situation."

"Oh. Alright," Lancer finds himself responding easily. Part of him balks— why did he say that? No, it's not alright, it's *his* job to keep the peace here and nip this seemingly growing conflict between his students before it grows into a larger fight. He should be the mediator here... but she said not to worry. It'll probably be fine.

CeCe regards Daniel for a long moment. His leg is bouncing in agitation, and he props his head up with an arm braced on his desk as he glares at her.

"Hmm. Something's different about you," she says finally. "I can't make you forget."

"What?" Daniel turns to Mr. Lancer. The attention makes Lancer realize he's slouching. Hmm. He normally prides himself on his posture, but he can't really bring himself to care at the moment. His body feels... detached. Calm. This is nice.

He should probably still pay attention, though. Right? There's something tense happening. His students are mad. They don't like each other, it seems, and it could devolve into conflict. He should pay attention. He meets Daniel's gaze. It takes more effort than normal to blink.

Something seems to click in Daniel's eyes as he turns back to CeCe. "You... Jeez. I *knew* there was something weird about you. I should have done something about it forever ago, I just wasn't sure." He turns in his desk so he can lean back in his seat and cross his arms. "Alright. I'll bite. What's your deal?"

"How'd you know?" CeCe asks.

"What?"

"Please tell me how you knew something was 'weird' about me." She hooks her fingers in air quotes for emphasis around 'weird.'

Daniel scoffs. "You're not even gonna try to deny it? Wow. Okay. I mean, it was really the night of the dodgeball..." He pauses, blinks, glances at Mr. Lancer, and shakes his head. "No! Quit that! Whatever you're doing."

"What am I doing?"

"You *know* what you're doing!"

"I really don't, though."

"You— Ugh! Whatever you did to Lancer that's got him all zoned-out zombie over there. You're trying to do it to me, and it's annoying, so stop."

Zoned-out zombie? Why would Daniel call him that? He's not zoned out. He's paying attention to the conversation. He's just feeling that lazy sort of sluggishness one feels when they're laying out in the sun on a warm afternoon, when the complete and total unwillingness to move is a desire deep-seated in flesh, bone, and mind.

…Ah. That's probably what Daniel is talking about.

"Gosh, this is so cool!" She seems excited, more so than Lancer has ever seen her. As if catching herself, she clears her throat and then refocuses on Daniel. "Okay. Did you mean the dodgeball game with the ghosts from back over the break in classes? That's so crazy, 'cause I don't remember seeing *you* there... *'weird',* isn't it?"

She... she's talking about the ghost dodgeball game? *Daniel* had been at the ghost dodgeball game? Strange. Mr. Lancer tries to think of any other dodgeball games with ghosts present. Could another game have happened during the break? Lancer doesn't remember either of these two being at the one he stumbled on, though, he had admittedly been concussed for most of that experience.

He wants to say something. Instead, he feels himself slouching forward. His upper body has started on a slow momentum towards his desk. He's going to hit his head. He should sit up. Why isn't he sitting up?

Daniel's voice protests. "Hey, stay right there! Where are you— Mr. Lancer?"

"Ah, ah, ah." Hands on Lancer's shoulders pull him back into a more upright position. CeCe's fingers are unnaturally warm through the thin fabric of Mr. Lancer's button-down. The moment she makes contact, he can *feel* his thoughts shift unpleasantly. "I apologize. That's not quite what I

meant by 'relax.' I need you awake. Just, ah. Please don't say anything?"

Mr. Lancer nods. At her words, he straightens and instantly feels a bit more awake. His mind is a bit more coherent, just enough that he can *definitely* tell that something is wrong. He's not thinking straight. She did— she's *doing*— something to him. What happens if he tries to pull away from her grasp? He's afraid to find out.

"Get your hands off of him!" Daniel's out of his seat now, too, and in his hands is a familiar, cylindrical object.

"Nope! Stay right there, my dude." The fingers on Lancer's shoulders dig in. He winces. "I'm not done asking questions yet, Danny. You've just opened up a whole new avenue of 'weird'... is that a thermos?"

Daniel presses a button on the side of the thermos. The cap pops off, and the end of it glows a soft cyan. A stream of blue energy comes out of it, washing over CeCe and Lancer. Lancer is quite certain this is the same or a similar thermos as the one that Phantom uses to contain the ghosts he defeats. It makes sense that the technology originated with the Fentons.

"...was that... supposed to do something?" CeCe asks.

"I, um... yes. Yes, it was," Daniel responds, seeming baffled. The thermos clicks shut, and he stares at it. "I mean, I didn't think you were a ghost, but now I know for sure. What even *are* you?"

"Mm, I'm not a ghost, you're right about that," she agrees. "Are you?"

"Wh— *Pssh.* No! That's ridiculous, how would I— You didn't answer my question!"

"Nope."

"Okay, so you're obviously going to be one of the annoying ones. Great. Mr. Lancer, you feeling okay?"

'Yes and no,' he wants to say, but he can't. He shouldn't. CeCe told him not to say anything, he can't just *speak.* That would be wrong, wouldn't it? He nods instead.

Daniel looks skeptical. He stows the thermos away in his bag. "Riiiight... alright, CeCe, how 'bout this. You let him go and stop doing whatever it is you're doing, and then we can talk. Preferably somewhere else. Deal?"

"I mean, we're talking just fine right now, so. No deal."

Oh. *The House of the Scorpion,* Lancer is actually in *danger* right now. He knew this entire situation was bad, but he's somehow only just realizing the fact. He's in danger, and Daniel is actively trying to bargain *himself* to get Lancer away from here. That's wrong! Lancer's the adult here. Daniel shouldn't have to be trying to keep him safe. Lancer wants to say something, to move, but he can't.

"Aw, now look what you did. You've gotten Mr. Lancer all freaked out," CeCe says disapprovingly. How could she tell? Maybe it's the fact that he's breathing so harshly. She pats his shoulder. "Don't worry, Mr. Lancer. Everything's going to be fine."

Ah. Okay. The touch is now reassuring. Everything's going to be fine. He relaxes. There's nothing to worry about.

Daniel seems pained as he watches Mr. Lancer. "You sure about that deal? I'm 'weird' remember? Your Jedi mind tricks don't work on me. Clearly, that's not something you're used to. I could tell you more about why I think that is. You're not just a *little* bit curious?"

"It's kinda cute that you think you have any power in this situation," she says, sounding amused. "I'm curious, you're right about that, but I don't have to bargain with you to get what I want."

"Well, what *do* you want?"

A tap on Lancer's shoulder. "Him!" she answers brightly. "His body, I mean."

Oh. Erm.

"Um. Ew?" Daniel says.

"Wh— *stop!* Gosh, humans are so— no. I don't mean anything gross. I need him for my research. And! Since I can already tell you're going to ask, I'm a facet of Knowledge. Uh. You could call me a social scientist, I guess? My whole existence pretty much revolves around collecting and recording information." Another pat on Lancer's shoulder. "I've been watching dear Mr. Lancer for months, and I need to be him now, so. Here I am."

She needs to do what now? Oh, right, she said not to worry. Probably nothing, then.

"Okay, sure," Daniel says. "You've got a teacher fetish. Awesome. I can't let you do... whatever you're gonna do, though, so—"

"Why not? Hasn't he stood by and let people bully you, and others like you? Hasn't he punished you unfairly, or gotten personally offended at your failures and made you feel even worse about them? Why should you care what happens to him?"

Her tone is light, but each question is a steak knife through his gut. His stomach roils. He... he has done those things. He's better about it now, sure, but that doesn't change his past actions. He can't escape what he has done.

Daniel sputters. "I— He's different now! That's not fair. I mean, sure, he used to be kinda awful, but I feel like no one is ever completely *not* awful, yannow? Just because he's kind of a jerk sometimes doesn't mean I don't care about him."

CeCe laughs. "'Kay, so. That wasn't the right tactic to convince you. Hmm. We're in a tough little situation here, aren't we? 'Cause I can't convince you to leave, but I have no intention of letting this man go either. Lancer's not a problem, he won't remember any of this by the time we're done, but still. You can't hurt me, and I really don't—"

Heat sizzles past Lancer's shoulder. He'd been staring at his desk, unable to look Daniel in the eye. The Thing happened so quickly that he can't even tell what happened. What was that? CeCe's hands disappear from Lancer's shoulders, and he hears a *thud* from behind him. The moment she's no longer touching him, something shifts in his head. He has a bit of control again. He hops out of his desk chair, moving as far away from CeCe as he can.

Everything is fine. He shouldn't worry.

No, what? Everything is most definitely not fine. He wishes he could stop thinking it is. Whatever influence CeCe has over him is apparently weaker since she's not touching him, but it's still here nudging at his thoughts, trying to convince him to calm down.

This is bad. Whatever is going on, whatever CeCe wants from him, he doesn't think she intends on letting him leave this room. What did Daniel just do? What is *happening?* The room looks purple now, a familiar atmospheric change during ghost fights. But where's the ghost? It's not CeCe, it can't be. She'd said earlier that she isn't a ghost, and the thermos doesn't work on her. Yet, a human would be significantly more injured that she looks right now. As it is, she's peeling herself away from the dented chalkboard behind her while looking just slightly annoyed.

Daniel. What about— where did he go? When did *Phantom* get here? Did Daniel just leave? Lancer hadn't even noticed the door opening.

"What was that about not hurting you?" Phantom asks, fists glowing green as he hovers a few feet in the air. Glowing neon eyes turn in Lancer's direction. "Are you— oh. Um. Hello, citizen! I was, uh, called here by a concerned student who ran out of here and told me someone was in trouble! I suggest you leave as well."

Ah. So Daniel is already gone. Perfect. Quick job getting help, though it makes sense that he has ghostly allies. Lancer has only taken one step towards the door before—

"Do *not* leave, Mr. Lancer," CeCe growls. "I still need you. You are not to leave this room yet. Sit down for now. This will all be over shortly."

He drops mechanically at the nearest desk. The flat top of it presses uncomfortably into his stomach, and he shifts to try to alleviate some of the pressure. He needs to leave. He has to warn people, to get this part of the school evacuated... but she said not to. He can't.

Phantom groans. "Uggggh, seriously? What even— Hold on, are you planning on turning *into* Mr. Lancer? Just so you know, I've already dealt with someone like you before. Not sure if you know him. His name's Amorpho?" After a moment, he adds, "This, uh, this is something I strongly suspect. I was not in here before thirty seconds ago, of course, so that was actually just a very educated guess."

CeCe regards Phantom with something like curiosity. "Well. This is different. You're a ghost? The Phantom?"

Phantom sends a nervous glance in Lancer's direction. "How about, instead of talking about that, we skip to the part where I kick your shapeshifting butt outta here? Then we can deal with the complicated stuff."

"But this is so *cool!"* CeCe says, striding over to where Phantom is floating. Looking perturbed, he floats up and away, out of her reach.

"What are you—"

"And you don't want Mr. Lancer to know about it," she continues, glancing in Lancer's direction. Then, she shrugs. "Yeah. I can respect that. I'll drop it for now. Look, I'll even do this."

She leaps up onto a nearby desk, one hand on her hip and the other hand pointing accusingly at Phantom. In an overly grandiose voice, she declares: "You, ghost! Have you come to foil my plans? I will not be stopped! I will have this man for my research!"

"Um. Thanks?"

"You're welcome! Leave this room."

"No."

"Darn. Worth a shot."

This isn't the *most* bizarre exchange Lancer has ever seen, but it's definitely up there. What is it that Phantom wouldn't want him, of all people, to know? Is there some sort of secret he's hiding?

CeCe steps across the desks to move closer to Phantom. He tries to float higher to escape her reach, but bumps into the ceiling. She pokes the bottom of his boot. He yanks his foot away, scowling.

"Stop it! Look, this? This is wrong. You can't just go attacking people for your stupid research!"

She frowns. "Ouch. I wasn't attacking him. What about that looked like an attack to you?"

"If you got your way, what would happen to him?"

"He'd die," she says easily. A strangled sound escapes Lancer's throat. "But that hardly— it's not an attack. It's not even a painful process! I mean, having your skeleton dissolved and replaced by something else normally would be, but I make sure it never hurts. And it's not like I do it for *fun!"*

Skeleton... dissolved...?

Phantom stares. "You're... *really* not a ghost."

She shrugs. "I might have been human a long time ago. Now, I'm just vibin'." She sighs. "If we have to get this over with... fine."

The only warning is a slight crouch. Then, she's leaping upward and tackling Phantom out of the air. He yelps, caught off-guard, and the two of them go crashing into some desks in the back of the room.

Lancer glances at the door, and then at the clock on the wall. His students will be here any minute, chattering and excitable from lunch. He can't get out to warn them. Maybe he can put a sign on the door? No. The mere thought of trying to get out of the chair makes him physically uncomfortable, despite the fact that he really wants to.

Phone. Where's his phone? He spots it on his personal desk, just a few feet away. He tries to scoot the chair but *oh dear oh god no no the desk is tipping.* Bad idea. He needs to *get up.* From what he's hearing from the back of the room—

"Ow! Hey— *oof.*"

—Phantom doesn't necessarily have this one in the bag.

Edward Lancer. Get out of the chair. Move your feet. Stand up. *Get out of the chair.*

He turns in the seat. Stretches his foot out.

Jane Eyre, no, he's disobeying, this is bad, this is wrong, she said to *sit* and he's trying to Not Sit and his stomach is violently protesting. Bad, very bad. He stops stretching his leg and pauses, trying to think.

Oh. Hadn't she said to sit down for *now?* That was a minute ago. 'Now' is over.

With that realization, standing up is no problem. He rushes over to his desk and picks up his phone. Phantom and CeCe are arguing loudly and breaking things and Lancer is quite certain he just heard the sound of his new planetary model shattering into pieces. He can't imagine what the class next

door is thinking.

First priority is keeping students away. He rushes to the door while scrolling through his contacts. Who can he call? Maybe the police, but they won't get here in the next few minutes. He needs someone who can let the school know *now,* come on—

Mrs. Focutta.

He hits the 'call' button. She's teaching right now, but hopefully she realizes he wouldn't call unless it were an absolute emergency. The room is too quiet as it rings, and he turns to see CeCe and Phantom glaring at each other. They both seem to be reassessing. CeCe ties her braids back and up into a loose pile on her head, her eyes never leaving Phantom's, and he seems to be catching his breath. Breath? Ghosts need to breathe? Lancer has never noticed that before.

Breathing and tying back hair. Despite being in the presence of two terrifyingly powerful creatures who look like kids, Lancer can't help taking a moment to wonder at their humanity. Hadn't they both technically been human at some point? Were they both children when they died or transformed or whatever other horrible thing? It's a sobering thought. Is there anyone out there mourning who these two were?

It's sad, but now isn't the time for him to be dwelling on it. Lancer turns away and puts his hand on the door handle.

"That door stays closed!" CeCe calls from the other side of the room. Phantom zips towards her in her moment of distraction. Lancer pulls his hand away like the handle is on fire.

The phone call goes to voicemail. *The Sound and the Fury.* He tries again, accompanied by a text that says, 'PICK UP NOW.' She does pick up this time around, obviously annoyed.

"*Ed, I'm teaching."*

A loud, metallic clang reverberates throughout the room as CeCe is thrown into the metal standalone closet in the back. It falls over on top of her, causing a much louder *BOOM*.

"...Edward?"

"Get to my room. My students are going to be here any second from lunch and they can't be here, you have to get them to—"

Another crash. The desk that CeCe just threw at Phantom knocks him into one of the spare tool bins on the back counter, causing dozens of scissors, rulers, and highlighters to scatter haphazardly across the floor.

"What on Earth—?"

"Dawn, please."

"*Fine, fine."* More distantly. *"This is an emergency. I have to leave right now. Kyle, run across the hall and tell Mrs. Dodd I have to step out. All of you behave and don't burn my room down! I expect a report back from her."* Her voice returns. *"I'll be right there. What is going on?"*

"An attack. Phantom's here, and I can't leave the room."

"Phantom's holding you hostage?"

"Phantom's keeping me *safe."*

"Oh. Well, why didn't you just say it was a ghost attack?"

He turns to CeCe and Phantom again. She's sitting on top of him, hands pinning his wrists to the ground by his head as she speaks lowly. A broken ruler sticks out of his upper thigh. His gloved hands grip her just manage to grip her wrists, a halo of his energy surrounding them. Smoke trails up from where they make contact, and her skin just below his grip seems unnaturally loose. A few of her braids are on the floor nearby. Her t-shirt has several burns on it, some of them with holes through which charred skin is visible. A thick, tarry substance spills out of her injuries and *moves* as it does so. Under her skin, bones shift in ways they shouldn't. Mr. Lancer's stomach does a funny, swoopy thing at the sight. There's an awful burning smell in the air.

"Because she's not a ghost," Lancer responds quietly into the phone. He tears his eyes away again. "I need you to redirect my students somewhere else."

"What about you?"

What about him? He's not sure. He puts a hand on the door handle to leave again. His body recoils.

"What are you doing, Mr. Lancer?" CeCe says sweetly. Her hands are around the base of Phantom's throat now. Lancer can't tell if she's choking him or just pressing him down to the ground. "Please hang up."

"I heard that. Don't hang up—"

He hangs up.

Chapter End Notes

It's not nice to hang up on people.

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Heyo! It's been a hot minute. Life got in the way. You know how it be. I once again will reiterate that I plan on finishing this fic, however long it takes. This chapter actually ended up being like 8000+ words originally, which is personally pretty long for me. Then there's the fact that this is a Big Chapter as far as things happening in it go and I wanted to get it right. I finally decided to just split it in two and release this part because I wanted to get something out.

Still taking video ideas, if you have them. I'm also taking key smashes and Extreme Reaccs, lol. I didn't want to push an OC too hard here, but I also really wanted Danny to have the conversation that happens in the next chapter, which needed some build-up, so... lol.

Chapter title is a continuation of the same song as last chapter because yes there's a definite pattern for these next few chappies, haha.

"...It's coming..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He hangs up.

CeCe sighs. She directs her attention back to Phantom, who promptly blasts her in the face with ghostly green energy from his eyes.

Dawn's classroom is on the other side of the school. It'll still take her a minute or two to get here. On the other side of the door, Lancer can hear the growing sounds of his students' chatter. He makes eye contact with Suzanna Strong as he's grabbing the construction paper privacy screen. She waves, clearly expecting him to open the door. He waves back, before putting up the paper. He locks the door.

It feels like a lifetime ago that Lancer watched Daniel's video for tips on dealing with ghosts. *'Don't try to interfere in a fight!'* he'd said. Lancer considers the words. The two of them are, quite comically, engaged in what almost seems like a slap fight as they push and claw at each others faces and hands. Still, Lancer can't *not* do something. He rushes to his desk, grabs the first thing his hand touches, and throws it in CeCe's direction.

He misses. The stapler goes wide, staples spill out everywhere, and he may have just broken one of the nicest teacher gifts he's ever gotten. Goodness, he couldn't have picked *anything* else?

At the very least, it got their attention. CeCe is distracted long enough for Phantom to form a bright oval of some sort, wedging it between them using it to propel her off of him. She grunts as she crashes into the bulletin board on the wall near Lancer, knocking some papers loose. Phantom quickly sails backwards towards the other side of the room as he tries to put some more distance between them. He holds one glowing hand up defensively**.**

"Mr. Lancer?" CeCe asks. She's not looking at him, her gaze solidly on Phantom, but her tone warns of danger. "Please sit."

Lancer sits down where he's standing.

"Phantom," she says. Any semblance of politeness or casual conversation has dropped from her tone, leaving behind a cold steel. "You've been around for. What? Not even two decades? You've deemed yourself a guardian of people but you refuse to let yourself see anything outside of this... this infantile sense of right and wrong. I'm old as fuck, dude. I've seen some stuff. My job is to write down the stuff I see. You're upset at me for doing my *job."*

"And I'm just doing *my* job!" Phantom shoots back. "I'm 'upset' at you for trying to *kill* someone! Murder is murder! Killing people is generally, yannow, *wrong.* Just because I haven't been alive for long doesn't mean I don't understand *that* much. I'm tired of people telling me I'm too young to have an opinion on things! I just— why can't you just stick to *stalking?* Why does he have to die?!"

"'Stalking' doesn't give me a full-enough picture! Understanding people means understanding *everything.* How they live, how they die, how hate and love are crazily and powerfully humanity's most motivating forces, yadda yadda yadda. Dunno if you've heard of 'naturalistic observation', but the idea is that I'm *unobtrusively* in the research environment. Until people like you come along and screw it all up, I guess."

"Seriously? Just pick up a history book! You don't have to kill people to get all that!"

"A *history book?!* Are you actually—"

The lunch bell rings. There's a pounding at the door.

"Edward? What's going on in there? I found an empty classroom for your kids but I need to know you're okay."

Mrs. Focutta.

The door handle jiggles. "Mr. Lancer? I called the Fentons. I know you said it wasn't a ghost, but I didn't know who else to call. Admin is on their way down here, but they're not gonna be able to do much, either."

"Mr. Lancer, will you please get her to leave?" CeCe groans.

Lancer stands robotically. What else can he do? Dawn can't come in here, he doesn't know what CeCe might do to her. Heck, anyone who tries to come in here to help may just get hurt. Plus, she called the Fentons. That means Phantom's at risk now, too. Or. More at risk than he already is, Lancer supposes.

He unlocks the front door and opens it. "...Hello."

"What happened?" Dawn peeks over his shoulder, trying to see into the room. He moves to block her, but she must spot some part of the mess behind him if her widened eyes are any indication.

"I'm fine. Everything is... fine. I just, er... I need to clean up."

"You need to clean up? Is Phantom gone? Is, uh, is the other thing gone? Do you need help? *What happened?*"

"I..." Lancer isn't sure what question to answer first, what lies to feed her. Involuntarily, he glances to the side. Both CeCe and Phantom's eyes are on him. He refocuses on Mrs. Focutta. She frowns. Her voice drops to a barely audible whisper.

"Blink twice if someone's still in there or three times if they're gone."

After a moment's hesitation, he blinks twice. Aloud, he says, "I appreciate the concern, but it would be wonderful if you could please give me some time to myself. It's been... a bit of an ordeal."

"...am I making it worse by being here?" she asks in another whisper.

He blinks twice again. She looks pained.

"Well," she says in her normal speaking voice. "If you're not in danger anymore, then I'm gonna have to get back to class. I'm taking you out later, though."

He blinks. "What?"

"You called me out of my class sounding like you were in mortal danger, Edward. I deserve an explanation."

"Ah. True."

"Promise me I will see you later," she presses gravely. "Promise me you'll hold out until the Fentons get here," she adds more quietly.

He can't promise that, though, can he? Not when he doesn't know the answer. He says it anyway, just to make her feel better, but the words are cardboard on his tongue and her frown says she sees right through him. He hopes she doesn't try to come back. That'll probably just make this worse.

She walks off. He closes the door and locks it again.

"Thank you, Mr. Lancer," CeCe says. It seems like in the past minute or two, her anger has drained out of her. She just seems tired now, like a student who stayed up too late the night before. She steps back, leaning against the damaged wall behind her and sliding down until she's seated on the ground. There's silence for a long moment. Then: "You shouldn't always trust what's in your school history books," she says.

"Why not?" Phantom fires back. "They're *textbooks.* They wouldn't teach them to us if they were wrong."

She lets out a humorless laugh, instead tipping her head back against the wall behind her. Her eyes are closed. Phantom frowns, still very obviously on his guard and not trusting her seemingly relaxed demeanor. "You have a lot to learn about your education," she says softly.

"I... what?" he asks, confused.

"Well, I mean. Think about the way I'm talking to you, versus how I talk to Mr. Lancer. Part of my skill set is detecting the tone my audience will be most receptive to and using that to manipulate them. You think your textbooks don't do the same? You think it's all truth just because there are words printed on a page?"

"That's not—"

CeCe waves him off. "Don't worry about that, that's a lesson you'll learn later. How about this little tidbit: I don't ever pick a target who isn't at risk of dying soon, anyway."

...what?

What?

The glowing energy around Phantom's hands fizzles out with a pop, summarizing Lancer's thoughts on the matter. The ghost seems stricken, confused, like he can't comprehend the words he just heard. Lancer's not at risk of *dying.* He's perfectly fine! Sure, his joints are acting up and he has to watch what he eats because of his cholesterol and he may be just this side of obese, but he's not a risk taker. She doesn't know what she's talking about.

CeCe seems to take their silence as a sign to continue. "Yeah. This girl had a terminal cancer she didn't know about. I mean, she knew *something* was wrong, but she didn't go to the hospital because she knew she wouldn't be able to afford it. Even if she had... given her skin color, her gender, and the track record of the area she lived in, her doctors could have and probably would have ignored her symptoms until it was too late."

"I..." Phantom clears his throat. "How can you say that? Doctors are *supposed* to take care of people, they wouldn't do that."

"It's what happened to her mother, though. Try looking up what causes health disparities sometime." She jerks her head at Lancer. "Your Mr. Lancer is due for a fatal heart attack pretty

soon. Those middle-aged arteries are not looking super hot."

Oh.

That's... oh.

Phantom seems momentarily at a loss for words. Then, agitated, he says, " *So*? If you know all that... you could be *helping* people. You're still taking away a few days or weeks or months or *whatever* that they could have been alive and doing things! People survive heart attacks all the time, why not *tell* him? And it sucks about the girl with cancer, but... oh, god, you're... are you *wearing* her body?"

"What part of 'dissolving the skeleton and replacing it with something else' did you miss? And sure, I guess I *could* technically be helping people. I can't tell the future though— I just kinda sense people's insides. I can tell if something is wrong, and I can tell if that something is fixable. Usually if I'm noticing it, it's not fixable. So, I watch. I wait for it to get worse. Then, I live out their life for a few months. They die quietly, peacefully, and I keep walking around and doing my research. Isn't that less cruel to the people around them?"

"*How* is that less cruel? Where does her family think she went?"

"They think she died in a car crash. But their CeCe died long before they thought she did. I gave them *more* time with her."

"You don't think they deserved to find out about the cancer and get the chance to say goodbye and stuff? You don't think it's wrong that you're pretending to be the person they love?"

"In their case? I think it was kinder that they lost her all at once instead of watching her fade away. You know what cancer does to people, right? You know how much it *hurts* the person and their family*?* CeCe was in a lot of pain, Danny."

"But you *knew* she was in pain! You couldn't have just— just—" He roughly shoves a hand through his hair, visibly distressed and searching for words. "I dunno! You could have found her pain meds or something!"

"Would you accept pain medication from a stranger telling you you're gonna die from a medical condition you don't even know about?"

"I mean— if she was in as much pain as you say she was, then wouldn't she not have cared at that point?"

"Well, now you're pretending like she would have acted like you would have in that hypothetical. You don't know anything about this girl."

"But you can like... make people do things. You could have easily just Jedi-mind-tricked her into doing it. I mean, if it would *help* her..."

"I only use my ability to maintain experimental control. That would be artificially interfering in the situation, which... honestly? This entire thing has been one big experimental confound, 'cause of you. So. Thanks for that."

"This isn't just an *experiment!* This is people's lives here!"

CeCe frowns, leveling Phantom with another look. She cocks her head to the side. "I thought you of all people would understand that death is a normal part of the life cycle. Why are you so against

it?"

"Because people deserve to stay alive for as long as they can? Because everyone should get to be old and do whatever they want with themselves? Because this is more than just someone dying from, like, something unavoidable, this is— freaking— I dunno! You playing god! I mean— what about Mr. Lancer? If you got your way, you took him over or whatever... what would happen to him when you need to like. Move on or whatever?"

"The person Casper High knows as Edward Lancer would retire and move away. The staff would have their goodbye party, though he's only friends with very few of them. The last of his family died a year or two ago. There's not really anyone else." She pauses. "Would you rather that 'happy ending', or would you rather the entire community mourning the loss of a teacher who suddenly passed away from a heart attack?"

"That's not..." Phantom groans, visibly frustrated. "I... I mean. You can't just... What you're doing still isn't *right*. You shouldn't get to decide how people live or die."

"Isn't that what you do, though? By saving people from ghost attacks? Keeping the town 'safe'? You're deciding that they should live, aren't you?"

"That's different!"

"How?"

"I— Well, I'm— Look, I dunno, it just is, okay? You're killing people, and sure they would die anyways I guess but that doesn't make it *right* that you're interfering!"

"Hmm. Alright, then. I think I'm done here." She stands, stretching. A green wall appears in front of CeCe, separating her from Lancer. "Relax, dude. It's obvious we're never gonna agree about this. I do my best to minimize the suffering for both the individual and the people who love them, given that they would have died anyway. I personally see this as more merciful. You have moral qualms with this, which is fine, but unfortunately I don't have the luxury for that. Ultimately *I* still need to do my research and record keeping."

"Wait—"

"So the way I see it," she interrupts, "is that I have two options right now. One: kill you because you're in my way, and do what I need to anyway. *Or,* I could leave. I *really* don't like option one, because again, I don't actually like killing people. Yet, option two means I abandon precious months of my time and effort."

"Wh— Pssh. What makes you think you could kill me?"

"The fact that I could have just ripped your head off of your spine the first time I tackled you."

"Ha! I mean, more powerful people than you have tried to kill me before."

"Ghosts and humans have tried to kill you before," CeCe says. "I'm neither."

"What *are* you, then?"

"I dunno? Some might call me a monster or something? A cryptid? A creature of unknown genus and species? You decide." She turns to leave.

"Wait!" Mr. Lancer interjects.

The two of them turn to him, and he's struck by the weight of their gazes. Phantom, the baby-faced superhero, capable of leveling buildings. CeCe, the equally baby-faced... cryptid? Whatever she is. The person with a morally ambiguous mission, who's served as a terrifying and abrupt reminder of Lancer's own fallibility. This entire time, they've argued over his fate, his *life,* and he just... watched. Listened. Speechless, maybe, or afraid. Both, if he's being honest with himself.

Can he resolve this situation? How would he even begin to do so? He wants to live. He would like it if he could return to the blissful ignorance of this morning, when the greatest of his problems was thinking his backup tie was missing from his car. He would like to make that dinner that Mrs. Focutta is expecting him at, because her husband makes the best meatballs Lancer has ever had. He wants to call up his cheerleading friends again and have a reunion. He wants to make it to the end of *DOOM.* He wants to see this year's seniors graduate. He wants to check in on all the students he keeps saying he's going to check in on. He still wants to do so many things.

And yet, Lancer isn't sure if Phantom can beat her. If she leaves, she's just going to go do this to someone else, someone who doesn't have a ghostly superhero to step in and fight on their behalf. While he ultimately agrees with *some* of her rationale, it's also uncomfortable to think of someone interacting with body of someone they believe is their friend, family member, coworker, whatever the relation may be, when in reality the person they know is dead. He's not sure if he could live with letting her leave... but he's also not sure if he'll live if she *doesn't* leave. He wonders if she'll be open to an idea...

"What if you could ask me questions?" Mr. Lancer asks.

"Pardon?" There she is getting all formal with him again. He supposes he understands it now, though the idea that she's been doing it to manipulate him is not ideal.

"For your research, I mean. You could keep, uh, 'stalking' me if you want. And, you could ask me questions about my life and my thoughts and what-not. Wouldn't that be *much* more valuable then trying to pretend to be me? If you want to, er, *understand* me, is that not a better way?"

"Hm... tempting." She perches on the metal bar of a desk tipped on its side. "Your behavior would change, though. You would know I'm observing you."

"You can make me forget, can't you?"

"True..." She turns to Phantom. "This one would know, though. I can't make him forget. Would you try anything stupid?"

"Bold of you to assume the answer to that question is 'no.'"

She laughs. "Yeah, okay, then. What about this?"

She turns back to Lancer. "This ghost you're seeing is also the person you know as Daniel Fenton. He lied earlier when he said he left the room."

Oh. What?... *What?*

"Wh— she's lying!" Phantom exclaims. "That doesn't make any sense. A ghost can't be a human *and* a ghost, that's—"

CeCe takes a step closer to Lancer. The green barrier appears again. She rolls her eyes, and drums her fingers on it.

"You know it's true, Mr. Lancer," CeCe insists. "I mean. Don't you remember your 'Daniel Fenton

mystery'? I know you haven't thought about it in a while, but doesn't him being Phantom explain a lot?"

It... it does explain a lot, actually. "Bathroom breaks." Bruises. Excuses and failed exams. Daniel disappearing at the football game. Dale hugging Daniel what seems like forever ago for Daniel's supposedly minimal role in that little girl's rescue... that has to mean that Dale knew, though, with that reaction. Right? Who else knew?

Lancer thinks about the strange way the students have been acting recently. Daniel's sudden popularity. Kiersten blowing up during her mock duel with Zander and trying to fire a Pocket Master at Daniel. The class holding up the IBS lie...

...do the students *know?*

"No," Phantom says, wide eyes on Lancer. "'Daniel Fenton mystery'? What even— nevermind. She's tricking you! She's doing that hypnosis thing!"

"Scout's honor, I'm not," CeCe says. "So! I'm now going to run this by you *again,* Phantom. You leave me alone. I go on my merry way, not harming a single one of the three hairs on Mr. Lancer's head. We both continue on as not-quite-normal Casper High School students. Mr. Lancer is none the wiser to both your secret *and* mine. Plus, you've, uh. You've still got a ruler in you... sorry. You should *probably* do something about that soon."

The ghost—Daniel?— visibly hesitates. His hand goes to where the broken piece of ruler is still sticking out. Why he hasn't pulled it out is a mystery to Lancer, but the injury definitely doesn't look pleasant.

"Phantom. Um. Daniel? Danny." Mr. Lancer and Phantom both wince at the rough start. The boy stares at the ground, and Lancer is once again struck by the fact that the ghostly savior of the town is a child. "I want you to know that I don't care that you're a ghost. Er. Well. I do care. I care because it means you're getting into fights and you're getting hurt and there's nothing I can do to stop it because it seems like you've taken it upon yourself to bear the responsibility of keeping this town safe. I thank you for that, but I want you to know that your safety is *my* priority."

Lancer pauses, before adding. "And you have to do what I say because I'm your teacher, and I am forbidding you from—"

Heavy bangs on the door. Jack Fenton's booming voice echoes into the room from the other side of the classroom door. "MR. LANCER! DON'T WORRY, WE KNOW THERE'S A ROTTEN GHOST IN THERE! WE'LL GET THIS DOOR OPEN IN A JIFFY!"

"Mr. Lancer, we'll get you out soon, okay?" comes Maddie Fenton's voice. More thuds.

Danny Phantom's eyes widen comically in panic, as it sounds like the door is starting to splinter. The green barrier between CeCe and Mr. Lancer drops. "Okay!" he says, turning invisible. His voice continues to echo slightly in the room. "Okay, fine! Deal, whatever, just do it! I— *if you hurt him*—"

"I won't hurt him," CeCe promises, already walking up to Mr. Lancer. Despite her words, he flinches away from her when she reaches for his shoulder. "Mr. Lancer, you're going to be forgetting some things and remembering something else instead. I promise it won't hurt a bit."

Chapter End Notes

Lancer doesn't get paid enough for this.

___

Heeeeey. Merry Craigslist.

Okay, to be fair, this chapter took so long a) because I wanted to get it right and b) you're actually reading the 5th or 6th version of it. I had this chapter completely done and finished on TWO separate occasions before this, and various technological shenanigans caused me to lose the chapter both times. In frustration, I legit just gave up writing it for like... a month? And now, on Christmas day for those that care about Christmas, I spent like 7 or 8ish hours straight just going through and editing and editing and editing and writing and editing some more. SO! ENJOY THE FRUITS! :) The writer logic in me says "hey maybe wait a day before posting this so you can look at it tomorrow again with fresh eyes," but I don't wanna do that. Also this chapter is doing something really weird with my spacing between a few of the paragraphs so sorry about any random gaps.

OMG WAIT NOW I CAN TELL Y'ALL CeCe is named CeCe because I asked a friend what I should name her, and this friend essentially said "oh for my minor characters I make acronyms based on abbreviations about their role in the story." I thought this was BRILLIANT. So. The person I'd referred to as "cryptid chick" in my notes for like a year became "C.C.", ergo, "CeCe." :)

ALSO I promise Lancer isn't going to die. I showed one of the other drafts of this chapter to my roommate and the first reaction I got was "So, you're killing Mr. Lancer with a heart attack? Because Danny saved him from CeCe, but not from the heart attack." and I thought "Oh, no, *you're right."*

I'm probably going to spend the rest of the day and portions of tomorrow going through the backlog of comments that I haven't responded to. Thank y'all so much for continuing to read and comment! It literally means the world.

Also the next few chapters have been written almost since chapter 2 was posted. I've been waiting for these chapters for a LONG TIME and now they're finally coming!! Which hopefully means the next wait won't be as long, but, uh... ya never know, I guess. In the meantime, please keep commenting video ideas. :)

"... Coming..."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"AAAAAH!"

"AAAAAH!" Mr. Lancer yells back at the sound of the war cry breaking the quiet of his half-destroyed classroom. His temples throb in dull pain. It seems fate has decided his day isn't over yet, despite how much he desperately wants it to be.

Sidney Poindexter, riding atop the back of a giant green dog, has a scowl twisting his features. A colander wobbles on his head, and he tips the rim of it back so he can see the classroom clearly. Two textbooks attached with ropes hang off of his shoulders, forming makeshift armor for his front and back. The hand not holding onto the colander brandishes a meter stick. The beast of a dog he's sitting on top of rumbles menacingly, head darting around the room as if searching for something and jostling Sidney with every movement.

"Where is she, Mr. Lancer? Lemme at her! I'll show her not to mess with you!"

"*War of the Worlds,* Sidney, who are you talking about?" Mr. Lancer asks. He bends to pick up the stapler he'd dropped in his surprise when the two ghosts had phased through his classroom door. Plastic and metal pieces fall away from it as he does so. If it wasn't broken already, it definitely is now.

Seemingly done assessing the room, both boy and canine turn to stare at Mr. Lancer in apparent confusion.

"Whaddya mean, who am I talking about?" Sidney asks, sounding bewildered. "I'm talking about the girlie that was in here and attacked ya earlier!"

"Ah. The ghost, you mean? It— er. She ran off. I think?"

"Oh. So Phantom managed to take care of her after all?" Sidney finally lowers the meter stick. He somehow seems both relieved and put out at the same time.

"I think so?" Mr. Lancer answers, uncertain. "I woke up here alone with the town's resident ghost hunters banging at my door and a splitting headache. I... I think I hit my head. I don't really remember what happened. Were you here for it?"

"Yeah! Er, well. Phantom showed up and I thought everything would be dandy, but then he kept getting tossed around so I left to go get backup." He pats the huge dog's head fondly, before sliding off of its back. "Threat's gone, boy. We're in the clear."

A small frown crosses Sidney's face, and he turns to Lancer again. "The Fentons are gone, right?"

"Yes, they left a while ago. I think they went in search of that rogue ghost. You're safe."

Lancer hadn't mentioned the Fentons by name, but it makes sense that the boy knew who he was talking about. Of course the Sidney would be wary of them. He's a ghost. The Fentons are ghost hunters. It shouldn't be that shocking of a revelation, but Lancer hasn't ever thought about how ghosts see the Fentons, rather than the other way around. Does Sidney live in constant fear of their whereabouts? The Fentons generally don't have much reason to come to the school, other than for

parent-teacher conferences or the occasional ghost incident. Still... even though he's not a ghost, Mr. Lancer has experienced first-hand how terrifying they can be when they catch the scent of a ghost. Sidney coming to his rescue anyway is all the more touching.

"It's very nice of you and your, um, friend, to come help me out. Thank you," Mr. Lancer says warmly.

Sidney takes off his colander and rests it against his front, puffing out his chest. "All in a day's work, Mr. Lancer! It is my job to protect people from bullies, so that's what I do! Isn't that right, boy?"

The dog lets out a boom of a bark as if in agreement, which would have been a bit more intimidating if not for Sidney's answering laugh. Neither sound helps Lancer's headache in the slightest. The canine ghost chuffs lowly and starts padding towards Mr. Lancer. Uh oh. As it gets closer to him, though, it starts to shrink. By the time it reaches his feet, it has transformed into the familiar form of little Cujo.

That's... new. Mr. Lancer suspects he should be more surprised by this, especially because he's quite certain that this means Cujo is the massive dog that went rampaging through Amity Park some time ago. At this point though, in *this* town, he's not really certain he can be that shocked anymore. He instead bends down to pick up the tiny puppy, setting Cujo on a nearby desk and giving him a broken ruler to bat around. After that, Mr. Lancer turns towards the rest of the mess on his floor and resumes his attempts at cleaning up. Sidney floats over to help.

"So... you really don't remember what happened?" Sidney asks curiously, tossing stray highlighters and pens into a nearby bin.

Part of Mr. Lancer really doesn't want to rehash what he remembers of the experience for a second time. Maddie Fenton had spent plenty of time grilling him for details earlier. At the same time, he figures he owes Sidney that much. The boy *did* swoop in here with cavalry to try and help him.

"No. I do remember I was in here with a student who had a question. Then, well. I don't know. Something attacked us. My student ran off so thankfully she got out safe, but Phantom had to come in and save me from... whatever or whoever it was."

"She got out safe..." Sidney echoes, frowning. He seems confused. He purses his lips, then opens his mouth like he's going to add something. He seems to think better of it and shakes his head. "I suppose as long as you're safe, it doesn't really matter what actually happened..."

What is *that* supposed to mean? Then again, does Lancer really want to know? He's tired. His head hurts. That cryptic comment can stay cryptic.

They clean in silence for a few minutes. Then:

"Mr. Lancer, you look beat," Sidney says softly. "Why don't you head home? Cujo and I will finish cleaning up around here."

A happy bark sounds behind them. They turn to see Cujo with a few soggy piles of something that might once have been paper sitting at his feet. He seems very proud of himself. Lancer's not even certain how he got a hold of them.

"Alrighty, *I'll* finish cleaning up around here," Sidney amends. "The place'll be spick and span when you get back, yeah? I know where everything goes."

"Are you sure?" Mr. Lancer says, more rhetorically than anything. He's been given an opportunity

to leave. He's definitely going to take it.

"Abso-posi-lutely! Go take a nap, you look terrible. Uh. No offense."

Mr. Lancer chuckles, and then winces as it sends another spike of pain through his head. He stands and stretches. He grimaces as it pulls at something in his shoulder. Painkillers. There are painkillers at home.

He slowly packs his things into his briefcase. As he approaches his classroom door, he pats his pocket to make sure his keys are there before putting his hand on the door handle.

He says goodbye to Sidney and Cujo and glances back at his room one last time before tugging the door open. Despite how far Sidney has gotten, the results of the attack or battle or *whatever* linger in the dented cabinets, broken boards, overturned desks and the occasional burn mark. No matter what Sidney does, there are going to be scars in his beloved classroom. It's probably coming out of his paycheck, too, even though the attack wasn't his fault. That will have to be a problem for later.

He locks the classroom behind him. The bell rings. His headache aggressively reminds him of its presence. He glances at his watch. The last lunch period of the day has just ended. He would normally have a new class starting now, but Principal Ishiyama has promised him a substitute in a temporary classroom for the kids. They would have already gotten alerts on their phones with instructions and the new classroom assignment. Still, there's no doubt that a few of them are going to show up here anyway. He loves his students, but he really needs to leave before running into any of them. The last thing he wants right now is more questions.

Since the bell just rung, there are students lingering in the hall. He probably should have timed this departure better if he wanted minimal student interaction, but he doesn't feel like going back to his classroom now. A few students look at him oddly as he walks past. No doubt news that "something happened to Mr. Lancer" has already started circulating. Thankfully, no one approaches him.

His stomach growls. What did he have for lunch today? Did he eat at all? Between helping Daniel out at the office and getting attacked, he doubts that he ever got the chance. He'll stop by the break room to grab his sandwich.

Mr. Lancer strides quickly through the halls on his way to the front office. His eyes are trained ahead of him in an effort to avoid making eye contact with any of the students, but a door opening catches his eye. He almost doesn't register it, except for a few key details:

1. The door is to the girl's bathroom.
2. There is a white piece of copy paper taped to the door that reads "out of order", an anomaly because the custodians have proper signs that they're supposed to put up.
3. Tucker Foley, holding a white bucket of something, is the one who opened the door.

Mr. Lancer stops and stares as Foley slips nearly undetected into the bathroom.

Why, Tucker?

What is he doing?

Mr. Lancer looks longingly down the hallway. The front office is right there. He can see it from where he's standing. He could ignore this. He could keep walking. He's so tired, and his head hurts and he *does not want to deal with this.*

He already knows he's not going to ignore the issue, though. He alters his path to head towards the bathroom, praying for an easy solution and that Tucker Foley has a damn good explanation that has

nothing to do with harassing girls.

Mr. Lancer pauses outside the door. There are still students in the hallway. Even though he's a teacher and he technically has the authority to intervene when he sees necessary, this still feels incredibly uncomfortable. This is not a room he is meant to enter. He loiters at the door for a moment, pretending to examine the sign. Wait just a moment. He *knows* this handwriting.

Samantha Manson writes primarily in cursive. Occasionally, though, she is required to write something in print. Her print letters have a very distinctive curve to them, even when they're in all capital letters and even if they're slightly awkward because she isn't used to doing so. It's unique enough that Mr. Lancer knows exactly who's hand held the black marker that created these letters.

Lancer sighs and steps to the side for a moment, pretending to do something on his phone. What is his current capacity to address this situation? He can still call for backup, right? Yet, that would involve finding another teacher, which would increase the amount of time between his current position and his bed... *Crime and Punishment.* Fine, then.

Mr. Lancer glances up from his phone. The last student in his line of sight just disappeared around a corner. He turns and storms the bathroom.

"*What* is going on in h...?"

The question dies in his throat. There's a flicker in the air by the sinks. The four students in the room turn to look at him in surprise. Mr. Lancer isn't sure what he expected Tucker to be doing, but he definitely had not anticipated the boy standing off to the side with Star Haugen. It looks like she had been explaining the two objects in her hands to Tucker, who had been scribbling on his PDA and nodding when Mr. Lancer walked in.

On the countertop of sinks, there are makeup supplies strewn in a small mess. Bloodied paper towels, a pair of scissors, a large white first-aid kit, and what looks like a patch blood-stained fabric mingle among them. Paulina Sanchez and Samantha Manson had both been turned towards a specific section of countertop. Paulina had both hands up in the air in front of her, one thumb and forefinger pinched into a "v" shape and the other hand holding a teardrop-shaped piece of brown foam with white powder on the end of it. She'd been posed like she'd been holding someone's face to put makeup on them, but the closest person to her is Samantha who is a good foot and a half away.

Samantha herself had one knee up on the counter, and she was positioned like she'd been bent over something. Her hands are gloved, and her fingers are bloody. In one hand, she has a wet paper towel with diluted streaks of crimson on it, and she'd also been holding it in the air just above the counter. The bucket that Tucker brought in is sitting next to her, and there are ice cubes on a clean paper towel beside it.

Upon his entrance, the two of them had quickly backed away from the empty air as if burned. Samantha hides his hands behind her back, but Lancer has already seen. Even if he hadn't, he can still see her hands in the mirror.

Mr. Lancer's annoyance transforms into a deep sense of dread.

"Don Quixote, what on *Earth* are you all doing? Who's hurt?" he asks, scanning the four students for injuries. They all seem fine. Why hadn't they gone to the nurse's office? *Who's hurt?*

"Uh..." Tucker says.

"Period!" Star blurts, clearly panicking.

Samantha and Paulina facepalm simultaneously.

"What?!" Mr. Lancer asks, more in disbelief than anything else.

Star points at the bloody tissues, then giggles nervously. "It's, haha, um... period... blood." Everyone in the room cringes at her words, Star included. Lancer isn't sure if he should laugh or yell. This is beyond Tucker being in the girl's bathroom or the sign on the door as a poor attempt to keep people away from whatever they're doing. Someone is seriously hurt, and they're trying to take care of it themselves instead of going to an adult about it. Why?

Maybe they'd been doing something they weren't supposed to, and they're afraid of getting in trouble. He doesn't care. He loves his students, he truly does, but he can't help but wonder at their occasional stupidity. No matter *what* they did, how is it that they didn't think it was a better idea to approach an adult about dealing with whatever injury this is?

Fear knots itself behind his sternum as he remembers something.

Wherever Samantha Manson and Tucker Foley are, Daniel Fenton is not far behind.

Daniel Fenton is constantly coming to school with injuries.

Daniel Fenton is suspiciously absent right now.

Lancer does another headcount. Four students. No Daniel. Lancer's eyes skim over the three stalls. The doors are all open, and the reflection on the mirror shows no one sitting on any of the toilets.

"Where is Mr. Fenton?" he asks. His words come out slowly, measured, leaving no room for argument or tomfoolery. The four of them straighten almost simultaneously. Even Paulina's uncaring facade cracks as she bites her lip and looks away.

"Who?" Tucker asks, voice high-pitched.

"Daniel Fenton. Your friend. Where. *Is*. He?"

He walks by each stall anyway in the ensuing silence, just to give them a little time to stew and exchange panicked glances behind his back. The stalls are definitely empty. He turns back to the students. None of them breathe a word. Star is pale, looking back and forth between Lancer and Paulina. Samantha tries very subtly to take off the bloody gloves, *clearly* forgetting about the mirror right behind her. Tucker stares at his boots. Paulina crosses her arms and examines the nails of one hand in apparent disinterest.

Fine, then.

"Star," Mr. Lancer says. She makes an odd squeak. He doesn't need to ask the question again.

"I... I..." She looks in Paulina and Samantha's direction again.

"Don't look at them, look at me," Mr. Lancer says, stepping to block the other girls from her line of sight. She stares at him with wide, petrified eyes. She looks like she's on the verge of bursting into tears. Lancer isn't sure when the last time she got in trouble was, but it clearly hasn't happened for a while.

This might be a bad tactic. He wipes a hand over his face and lets out a shaky breath. He lets his

concern and desperation bleed into his next words. "Listen. You all aren't in trouble. Yet. Just... *please.* If someone is hurt, I *need* to know about it. I want to help you all. I see those bloody tissues on the counter, and I can't help but think the worst. Whether it's Daniel or someone else, *please* tell me what's going on. Your safety is my priority right now."

"Aww, shucks, Mr. Lancer," says a familiar, tired-sounding voice. "You coulda just said so."

Mr. Lancer turns back towards Samantha and Paulina. Daniel Fenton flickers into existence on the countertop between the two girls.

"Danny!" Samantha hisses.

He waves her off. "'m tired, Sam. And also probably concussed, if I'm being honest, so I'll probably regret this later, but... Star, you *really* suck at lying."

Star huffs. "You try coming up with a good lie on the spot like that!"

"I mean..."

Mr. Lancer stares at Daniel as the kids start bickering. His shirt is clutched in one fist. His chest has a few reddish-purple bruises. In the mirror, his back is a far worse-off patchwork of purpling bruises. Much of the clearer skin is riddled with old scars that range from short, nearly invisible lines to a large, gnarled-looking burn scar that starts on his hip and curves around part of his back. His jeans have a large, jagged, rounded hole in them. The edges of the hole are stained red, and the hole itself frames an awful wound on the side of his upper thigh; Lancer suspects they'd used scissors to cut away the fabric for better access to the wound.

What happened to him?

Where did he *come* from?

People don't just appear out of thin air... but ghosts do...

How...

What?...

A Christmas Carol, is Daniel *dead?*

Mr. Lancer looks around at the gathered students, who are now all watching him warily. Samantha, to her credit, has successfully disposed of the gloves without Lancer noticing. Paulina's cool countenance is betrayed by how tightly she's fisting the foam makeup thing in her hand. Tucker and Star are both tense and just staring. Lancer's gaze swings back to Daniel.

The boy fidgets with the paper towels at his side, seeming to lose whatever confidence he had conjured up to reveal himself the longer his teacher is silent.

"Um... Mr. Lancer?" he asks, voice small.

He's just a *child.*

Alright. Nope. One problem at a time. The question of how he appeared just now is for later. Right now, he's needs help.

"I'm going to go get the nurse," Mr. Lancer finally says.

"No!" the five students yell simultaneously.

Lancer pauses, waiting for an explanation.

"I just... can we please not?" Daniel pleads. "Sam and Tucker can fix this up, they've done it a ton of times before."

There's a *physical* pain in Lancer's chest at the thought of this happening in the past. He caught them this time, but how many times have they done this?

"I understand you trust your friends, but I can't just—"

"You have to," Daniel says, panic leaking into his voice. "Please!"

"Mr. Lancer, this is life or death," Samantha says.

"I know, that's why I want to tell the—"

"No, you don't get it," Tucker adds. "This is *Danny's* life or death. The nurse is gonna tell his parents, and he would have to explain how he got hurt."

Mr. Lancer stares. "How did he get hurt?"

Silence.

"How did you get hurt, Daniel?"

"I'll tell you if you promise not to tell the nurse," Daniel answers.

"*Or,* you tell me and *I* decide not to tell the nurse."

"Danny's not normal, Mr. Lancer!" Samantha says. Daniel winces. "I— Sorry, Danny. That came out wrong. I just mean... he heals from injuries differently. Even if you tell the nurse, the damage that the nurse'll see is gonna be a lot different than the damage his parents or a doctor would see."

Tucker chimes in. "And if he goes to a hospital, which is *already* a shady enough place as-is, they're gonna see that his vitals don't make sense, and then they'd probably call more doctors who would do all their poking and prodding and then eventually his parents or the Goons in White would hear about it and he'll get experimented on and—"

"Y'all, *please* shut up," Daniel hisses.

This... this is too much. Lancer's so in over his head here. He takes a long moment to think about his next move. Then, he makes a decision.

He turns to Star and Tucker. "Are you two actively contributing to remedying this... situation?"

"Um. I guess not actively, no?" Tucker says.

"Paulina is using my makeup 'cause my skin tone is closest to Danny's," Star adds quietly.

"Go back to class, then."

"But—"

"I will write you late passes now, but if you stay here any longer then you're not getting them," Mr.

Lancer says more sternly, already opening his suitcase to pull out some spare passes. No further protest comes after that. They name their respective classes, and Lancer scribbles out his signature and the relevant information and hands them over. Star calls out a goodbye and hightails it out of the bathroom, but Tucker lingers.

"Danny?" he asks.

"Go ahead, man," Daniel says. "I'll be fine. It's just Mr. Lancer."

Tucker nods. "Cool... see you later then, I guess."

Lancer turns to the other three when the door closes. They stare at him expectantly.

"Do you two know what you're doing?" Lancer says to the girls.

"Please. I've been using concealer since I was a baby," Paulina says dismissively.

Samantha nods. "I've had to deal with a lot worse than this before."

"...is there ibuprofen in that first aid box?" he adds.

"Um. I think so?" Samantha turns and rifles through the box, before pulling out a small bottle. He holds his hand out for it. Slowly, confused, she places it in his hand.

Mr. Lancer rubs his temples in a futile attempt to ease his headache. Handling this situation the way he's about to handle it and *not* reporting everything that's happened... he's definitely putting his job on the line. Still, he locks eyes with each of them as he says:

"Lock the door after me. Meet me in my classroom when you all finish up in here."

With that, he turns and walks out of the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

> Admittedly, Lancer's not certain he could have come up with a better lie if he were in Star's shoes.
>
> ___
>
> Y'all this fic is almost done, I'm so excited. Also I have an epilogue thing planned, which is why the chapter count went up again.
>
> Literally this chapter has been written basically FOREVER, but I just didn't have the time to get around to editing it.
>
> Keep those video ideas coming, like always. I am still reading them, and I am still planning to write more of Danno's videos.

"...But you are not alone."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I can see you running, running,
Every night from the same darkness
It's coming, coming
But you are not alone."

- "Halo", STARSET

"Mr. Lancer! I thought I told you to go home," Sidney scolds when Lancer unlocks his classroom door again.

Mr. Lancer doesn't answer. Instead, he presses past the child safety lock on the bottle of ibuprofen, shakes out two tablets, and dry swallows them. Then, he sits at his desk and stares at the wood in front of him.

How?

He'd put off seriously considering Daniel just appearing out of nowhere in the bathroom. Now that there aren't any bloody paper towels or stuttering students in front of him anymore, it ebbs back into his thoughts. The kids were talking about how Daniel's parents and the Guys in White would "poke and prod" at him...

...that means he's a ghost. Right? Somehow. That has to be what it means. But *how?* And for how long? Has he been a ghost this entire time? It doesn't make sense. He's *bleeding,* and, and he's... well, ghosts can be injured. Lancer has seen as much in Phantom's clashes with the ghostly threats to Amity Park. But *HOW* ? Why doesn't he look like the other ghosts do? And how did he get so injured?

Mr. Lancer sucks in a sharp breath as something occurs to him. The Guys in White visiting this morning. Do they know? Is that what the so-called "internship" conversation was about? It would certainly explain why Daniel had seemed so tense around them. Did those men circle back to the school and corner Daniel after he left Lancer's classroom?

Or is it that the Fenton parents are to blame? Is this why Daniel is so cagey about them? Did they do something to him? They can't have. If they knew their son was a ghost... oh. Well. Lancer isn't sure what they'd do if they knew their son was a ghost. Anyhow, the way the students were talking about it in the bathroom just now, the talk of keeping the situation out of the ears of the elder Fentons, means they know nothing about it.

But Samantha and Tucker know. Paulina and Star know. They were helping him cover it up, because they feared for their friend's safety.

"Mr. Lancer?" Sidney says again. His voice is closer this time. Lancer looks up. The young ghost is floating in front of his desk, expression twisted in concern. Right. An explanation.

"I... I'm about to have a private conversation with a student, Sidney," Mr. Lancer says quietly. "I appreciate all your help, but do you mind leaving?"

"Oh." Sidney deflates. Guilt hits like a punch to Lancer's gut. "I'm sorry if I... nevermind. No problemo! I'll just scoot on outta here, then. Come on, Cujo."

"Hold on a moment," Mr. Lancer says. He stands and walks around his desk, stopping in front of Sidney. Technically, he's not supposed to initiate contact like this, but when was the last time an adult had shown this boy affection? "Do you mind if I hug you?"

Sidney blinks. He seems confused now, but he floats up a little higher. "Er. No?"

Lancer wraps his arms tightly around the young ghost, resting his chin in short, cool black hair. Sidney's arms wrap tentatively at first around Lancer's back, and then his arms tighten as well. He's cold, his skinny body has an unnatural give to it that suggests a lack of bones, his ghostly white glow seems to brighten a bit, and he's so, so *small.*

Sidney Poindexter died because he didn't have anyone looking out for him. Mr. Lancer refuses to let the same thing happen to Daniel.

He pulls away, but leaves his hands on Sidney's shoulders. "I meant it when I said I appreciated your help," he says firmly. "I was planning on going home, but this came up and I need to deal with it now. You are normally welcome to my classroom anytime, but I'm afraid this discussion I'm going to have with this student may be... a sensitive topic. I'm only asking you to leave for the sake of their privacy. Understand?"

"Oh, I knew that," Sidney says, like a liar. The relief in his tone is palpable. "No prob, Bob. I'll be back later to finish cleaning up there, then."

"Thank you, Sidney," Mr. Lancer says sincerely. Sidney gives him a crooked grin, and then picks up Cujo and disappears through Lancer's far wall.

When Daniel, Samantha, and Paulina enter Mr. Lancer's classroom ten minutes later, he's extremely worried by how normal the boy looks.

No one could ever possibly guess how hurt he was just by looking at him. The bruise on his temple would be totally invisible if Lancer didn't know to look for the slight bump, and he otherwise looks like the picture of health— no blood, no visible bandages, *nothing.* His shirt is wrinkled, but that's hardly something that would catch a teacher's eye. He's also wearing an entirely different pair of jeans. Does he come to school with a change of clothes?

How many times has this happened?

Lancer writes passes for Samantha and Paulina after they tell him their respective destinations. Paulina leaves without protest after a dazzling smile and a *"Thank you, Mr. Lancer!"* , but Samantha lingers in the doorway much like Tucker had in the bathroom.

"Danny hasn't done anything wrong, Mr. Lancer," she says resolutely. "He has a right to do what he needs to do to keep himself safe and—"

"That's quite enough, Ms. Manson. I want to hear it from him."

"He doesn't have to tell you anything," she insists. She shifts her gaze to her friend. "Danny,*you don't have to tell him anything."*

"Sam, chill. Seriously." Daniel is slumped in a desk three rows away from Mr. Lancer's, hands shoved into his pockets and not making eye contact.

Samantha rolls her eyes and turns back to Lancer. Her fingers tighten on the door frame. She tongues at her cheek, her expression agitated. This is getting annoying. Why won't she just leave? He admires her loyalty to her friend, but this isn't a conversation that—

"He better not get taken away to some facility in the middle of nowhere because of something *you* did, Mr. Lancer!" she finally says. Her tone is just shy of hysterical, and this time she can't quite hide the fear for Fenton that Lancer realizes has been keeping her in the room.

"Sam," Daniel says. "Hey. I'll be fine. Okay? Don't worry about it. She has nothing to worry about, *right* Mr. Lancer?"

"I, er... right," Mr. Lancer stutters. What in the world?

Samantha fixes one last glare on Lancer. "Text me when you get out, Danny, yeah?" she says to her friend, her voice softer than before. Daniel says something to the affirmative, and she turns and closes the door behind her. Mr. Lancer stares at the door, stunned. That was distrust. Fear. She'd thought him a threat to Daniel, after what happened in the bathroom.

He's had skittish students in the past. Some of these kids don't trust adults, that part is not unfamiliar to him. But the idea of a student who he previously got along just fine with now suspecting him of being a threat... that's new. It stings a little, too, if he's being fully honest.

"Ignore her, she's just freaking out a little," Daniel says. "We've, uh. We've never really had to deal with... adults. Not like this. Not for long, at least."

"What do you mean by that? Not for long?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it."

That's not suspicious at all.

"...so..." Daniel says. "...I'm sure you have questions. Can we make it, quick, though? I, uh, I've got class and all and, um. Yeah."

"I can write you a pass like I did for your friends," Mr. Lancer says. "This is just a bit more important than that right now."

"Eh." He shrugs. "Not really."

"Daniel!"

"What? I'm serious. We've already dealt with it. I'm just tryna be a good student here is all. No nurse necessary."

"No, the deal was you tell me what happened and *I* decide if I shouldn't go to the nurse."

"...I don't remember agreeing to that," comes the grumbled response.

" *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul,* Mr. Fenton, why are you—" Lancer stops. Takes a deep breath. This headache isn't helping him not handle this situation irritably. Daniel doesn't want to have this conversation, so he's stalling. That's fine. It's probably difficult for him anyhow. Anyone with that number of scars on them has gone through some sort of trauma, let alone a teenage boy.

Mr. Lancer softens his tone. "Is this related to why you're always leaving class?"

Daniel grimaces. "Yeah, I guess you could say that. Gotta take care of my ghost business and all."

His ghost business? Goodness. Lancer had initially though the wounds were inflicted on him or something, but what if they're a side effect of his physiology? Lancer has seen all manner of things happen to the bodies of ghosts. They melt. They transform. They get limbs blown off into goopy messes. They stretch unnaturally as they get pulled into that thermos Phantom carries around. Just because Mr. Lancer hasn't seen *them* with scars doesn't mean they're nonexistent.

"When did the... 'ghost business' start happening?"

"Uh... I mean, this school situation is new. My friends clean me up all the time, but usually we wait to deal with it until classes let out. I guess this was just... it was really hard for a different reason, this time around. Paulina and Star aren't normally there either, but Star offered her makeup."

"That's not what I mean." Lancer can't bring himself to ask how long he's been dead.

"What? Oh. Okay. I... there was an accident two-ish years ago. Give or take a few months, maybe."

Two years ago. *Flowers for Algernon,* that's right in the middle of 9th grade. How old was he? Fourteen? Fifteen? Did anyone other than his friends even notice? Plus, he's been aging. Hasn't he? He definitely looks older than he did in his freshman year. He's grown taller, less skinny.

Lancer has noticed ghosts change their appearances before. Those are usually notable changes, though, like clothing or extreme changes in size. Then again, Lancer supposes he's never been around a ghost long enough and often enough to notice small differences over time. Can ghosts manipulate themselves to give off the illusion of aging? Or can they actually age? Or is Daniel not a ghost at all? This is so confusing.

"What kind of accident?"

"Lab accident."

"As in, your parents' lab?"

"Yes, but— no, see, that look on your face is exactly why I didn't wanna say it. It wasn't their fault! They don't even know it happened!"

"That's not reassuring."

Daniel groans. He'd leaned forward in his passionate defense of his parents, but now he sits back in his seat and turns away. He notices a stray maker on the ground, and he traps it under his shoe to start rolling it around. The treads of his sneakers must suddenly lose their grip on it, though, because the marker suddenly goes skidding back towards the back of the classroom. He turns to watch its path, and then seems to take notice of the other remaining signs of the attack from earlier. Sidney had done a good job, but he didn't quite finish.

"Um." Daniel regards the half-cleaned mess for a moment before turning back to his teacher, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "What happened back there?"

"Daniel." The boy is still stalling.

"This is why you had to cancel your class, isn't it?"

Lancer sighs. "...yes. Back on topic now, please. Does this accident have anything to—"

"Are you hurt?" Daniel presses. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Thank you for your concern but I'm *fine,* and no, I..." Mr. Lancer trails off.

Students in the hall may have overheard the sounds of whatever fight or conflict happened in here and put two and two together when Lancer's cancelled afternoon classes were announced, but only the other staff members who came to check on him and Sidney know that Lancer had no memory of the attack. Why would Daniel ask him that, instead of just asking what happened?

"Oh, crud," Daniel says softly. "I don't... I said something, didn't I? That's a 'figuring something out' look. Jeez, nevermind, forget I asked, clearly you're fine. Look, you wanted to get back on topic. What else did you wanna ask me?"

He's being cagey again. Does he know something? "Daniel..."

"Earlier! In the bathroom! You, um, uh, you, youuuuu—" The boy looks even more desperate to change the subject now, and he's quite conspicuously searching for a way to do so. "You said that your first priority is me! You said that. Why did you say that?"

What? This conversation is almost giving Mr. Lancer whiplash. If Daniel's tactic is 'half-answers and deflection with a sprinkling of confusion,' it's certainly working. Maybe going along with it is the best strategy here, then. Follow the abrupt changes in the flow of the conversation, rather than trying to wrest it back into his own control. It may work out in Lancer's favor.

"Of course I meant it. It's my job to keep you safe."

Daniel lets out a relieved breath. He could at least *try* to be more subtle. "Heh. You keeping me safe."

"Is that so hard to believe?" Mr. Lancer answers, slightly affronted.

"No, no, no, not at all. I just..." There's a small smile on his face. As Lancer watches, though, the boy's gaze fixes unseeingly on some point on the desk in front of him. The smile fades. "...you ever get tired of it?"

Of all the places Lancer was expecting this to go next, this definitely was not one of them. "Tired of what?"

"Yannow. Of being responsible all the time." Blue eyes flick back up to meet Lancer's. "You're a teacher. It's your job to look out for us, sure. Don't you ever get tired of it?"

"Why would I get tired?" Mr. Lancer asks.

Daniel scoffs. "Because it seems exhausting! Aren't we like, annoying? Aren't we disruptive, and, and *rude,* and ungrateful and *mean* and *angry* and snapping at you all the time about how much we hate you and how terrible you are at your job? About how you should just go back to where you came from even though you're just trying to *help* and sometimes you mess up but that's only because you can't be perfect *all the goddamn time—"*

He stops talking abruptly, eyes wide and panicked. Somewhere in the middle of his rant, his eyes had turned a *bright, glowing green,* but as he cuts himself off they look normal again.

"Um. Sorry. That was... not where I wanted to go with that... at all. Did I mention I'm probably concussed? I didn't mean that about you. At all. You're, uh, you're not terrible at your job, I didn't mean to— I'm sorry."

Though still reeling from the abrupt change in eye color, Lancer's concern for this student

overwhelms his shock. A couple of years ago, it might have unsettled him out. Now? Now he just sees it as another part of this poor child in front of him who's gone through too much and is terrified of saying anything about it.

Mr. Lancer stands and starts to walk over. Daniel stops talking, his stiffness telegraphing his panic, but Mr. Lancer only sits in the desk next to him.

"Daniel," Lancer says, hoping his tone conveys the same amount of warmth and protectiveness he feels. "My priority is you because I want you to be safe and happy. Not *just* because I'm your teacher and I'm 'supposed' to do it, but because I *care.* "

Lancer chuckles, before continuing. "And yes, I suppose, it gets tiring sometimes. Yes, sometimes it feels like you students are getting on my last nerve and sometimes I want nothing more than to snap and walk out the door... but at the end of the day, you all are *still* the reason I keep coming back to this building. I want to see you all grow and succeed and become wonderful people who will walk off of that graduation stage and go do something great."

There's a small shake of Daniel's head at the last sentence, and Mr. Lancer internally winces. Somehow, it was the wrong thing to say.

"Hah. Me? What am *I* gonna do that's great? I'm, like, a terrible student. Besides I can't just graduate and bail, I..." He stops. He makes eye contact with Mr. Lancer for a brief moment, and then shakes his head again and looks away. "There's too much I'm responsible for," he says quietly.

"There's a lot to address in what you just said, but I'll start by saying this. I have never told you how proud I am of you, Daniel. Do you not realize how much you grew last semester?"

He blinks, like he'd never considered it. "What? No?"

"You pulled yourself from a failing grade to *B* in just a few weeks . You don't realize how hard that is?"

"Well, I mean… sure, I guess, but that's only 'cause I had help."

"So? You're still the primary reason for your own success, Daniel. People can help you all they want but ultimately *you're* the one who does the work that gets the grade. Give yourself some credit."

"Okay. Um. Thank you," he mumbles. He shifts, obviously uncertain what to do with the praise. Lancer needs to compliment him more often.

Now for the harder part. Time to take a shot in the dark.

"Alright. Moving on. Are you happy with your responsibility?"

"Am I *happy* ?"

"There's a reason you asked me about my job getting tiring, isn't there? So I'm asking if your job, if your responsibility, makes you happy."

"I…" He trails off. His brows furrow. "I mean… sometimes."

"Is the 'sometimes' worth the stress?"

Another long pause as Daniel tries to come up with a response. The fact that he's struggling is telling enough.

"That's not… that's too simple," he finally says, his voice wavering.

Lancer shakes his head. "If you're tired, Daniel, and you don't *want* to do it anymore, and it's not making you happy... maybe you should stop doing it. Maybe it doesn't have to be just *your* responsibility." He doesn't even know what 'it' is. Daniel won't tell him.

"I *can't* ," Daniel says. "I just… it has to be me." He's leaning over his desk, now, elbows resting on the surface in front of him and hands fisting into the hair near the back of his head. His arms almost form a cage around his head, so Lancer can't see his face, but it sounds like he's close to crying.

The guilt comes back full-force, but he may be close to a breakthrough. " *Why,* though? If it's causing you this much stress, if it's hurting you and making you so miserable, why can't you just not do it?"

" *Because no one else can!* " he exclaims, his head whipping up to face Lancer again. Daniel's voice is raw and ragged and aching with a deep, wrenching pain that Lancer would never wish on anyone and he wants nothing more than for this kid to trust him enough to share this burden. The young Fenton stands, starting to pace in the aisle between them.

"And sure, it's like *exhausting* or whatever and I barely get any sleep on a *good* night and I'm failing half of my classes and I'm jumpy at my own shadow and I hardly have any time to do energy of th *e* few things I actually fucking enjoy, but if the choice is between me getting sleep and me keeping someone *alive* then I'm going to pick the second option! Not to mention if this gets out any more than it already has I could be *killed* or get taken away somewhere and I'd get experimented on and I... I can't.... I don't... I shouldn't be telling you this, I'm... you know, probably concussed and all..."

He stops pacing, one hand white-knuckle gripping onto the edge of a desk like it's the only thing keeping him upright, and the other hand tangled in his hair again. His breath comes in short bursts. His eyes are squeezed shut, though tears still slip silently down his cheeks. This is too far. Lancer never wanted to cause him this much distress.

"Daniel," Lancer says, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Look at me."

His eyes raise to meet his teacher's. "I don't wanna get t-taken away," he whispers. "I don't wanna die."

"I... I will do my absolute best to make sure that doesn't *ever* happen," Mr. Lancer responds firmly.

Daniel's expression completely crumples at that. A half a sob slips out before he slaps his hand over his mouth and steps back. Lancer holds his arms open, a wordless invitation. Daniel takes one step forward, and his second step puts him in his teacher's reach. Lancer wraps arm around his shoulders and cradles Daniel's head against his chest with the other hand, hooking his chin on top of his head. He doesn't say anything as Daniel's shuddering breaths turn into quiet crying, and then louder, heartbreaking sobs that cause a tear to roll down Lancer's cheek as well.

There's so much Mr. Lancer still doesn't understand about this boy. He doesn't know who Daniel is "keeping alive," or why he's the only one who can take on this life-or-death "responsibility". Lancer doesn't know what 'it' is or how it's affecting so much of his student's life. He doesn't know what happened at the football game, or what exactly happened all the times Daniel suddenly had to

run out of class. Lancer doesn't know if this has anything to do with the ViewTube videos or the sudden popularity or Masters' animosity. He still doesn't have many of the answers to the Fenton mystery, and he *still* doesn't know what went down this afternoon that got Daniel so hurt. He can't even promise that he can keep Daniel safe.

What Lancer *can* do is be here, right now. He can be a shoulder to cry on and an adult to trust, because even if Daniel Fenton is a baffling riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, he's also just a kid that needs support.

Mr. Lancer hugs the child in his arms a little tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Hugs can’t solve problems, but then again neither can band-aids. Both of them sure do something positive, though, and that’s what matters.

—

Life is hard right now, y’all. One of my family members is sick. They got tested this morning and we’re hoping it’s not COVID-19. I’m swamped with work and classes and my internship. My internship is unpaid and spending more every month on rent and groceries than I’m making with my jobs. I’ve felt so hopeless so many times the past few weeks and I really just wanna sleep for a long time sometimes.

And then I get a comment from one of you, and my day gets a little better.

Thank you all for being here with me for the past year and half or whenever the heck I started posting this fic.

The next chapter is an humorous epilogue, so this is technically the last chapter. I didn’t really feel like I did the fic justice buuuuut I dunno. This also feels right at the same time. Does that make any sense? I dunno.

Try as I might, I also keep getting the nagging feeling that there’s a plot thread I missed somewhere. If there’s something that doesn’t make sense to you, please point it out to me? This is my real longform multi-chapter fic and I’m still learning. XD.

Keep those video ideas coming, and thanks again.

—Zombie Merlin

Epilogue: Where It All Clicks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This is the first time Lancer has ever encountered the ghosts of people he knew when they were alive.

Well, he supposes there's Daniel, but Daniel doesn't really count because... just because.

Mr. Lancer remembers Tanayah Bronstead and Angelo Ono's epic rivalry quite well. It was as much of a Casper High mainstay as the fact that the school mascot is the Ravens. No one knows what started their dislike of each other, but at every available opportunity one of them would find a reason to take a shot at the other. A snide remark in the halls. Actively telling their students that the other's area of expertise — physics or chemistry — was inferior in some way. Lancer always thought that it wasn't too serious, a silly pseudo-animosity that got played up for the amusement of the staff and students.

The vicious way these two ghosts tried to destroy each other a few minutes ago makes him suspect differently.

He tries not to think about it as he stands by the main back doors of the school, shuttling students back inside now that the all-clear has been called. Somehow the conflict had triggered the school fire alarm. Lancer wasn't even sure that anyone knew there was a ghost fight happening until one of the the hundreds of evacuated students on the football field spotted two figures floating above the school.

The damage, thankfully, wasn't that bad as far as ghost attacks go. According to the emergency walkie-talkie chatter, the destruction this time around had been localized to a single science classroom in the 4000 hall. The room was in the middle of being remodeled from the *last* ghost attack. Given some previous ghosts' reasons for wreaking havoc on the town in the past, Lancer suspects the remodeling was part of the problem. At least this will probably make a good addition to CeCe Knowles' project on the responsibilities of teachers. She hasn't spoken to him about it for a few days, but he imagines she would be very curious about how staff are expected to respond to emergencies.

One last pair of students walks past him, chattering idly about which ghost was "cooler." Bronstead and Ono — or, Blastmaster and The Rule Breaker, as they apparently were called now — were *way* before the time of any of the students that currently attend Casper High. He doubts the ghosts were recognized by any of the kids. The staff, though... Lancer had seen the looks on the faces of some of his colleagues. Mr. Falluca, especially, was close friends with Mr. Ono. Lancer will need to check on him after this.

First, though, he needs to make sure there aren't any straggling students outside deciding to use this opportunity to skip class. He lets go of the door of the school so it can swing shut. He should hurry, though; his class is going to get restless after more than a few minutes without him. He jogs out onto the grass to give him a better vantage point. From here, he can see anyone who might be on the football field or in the stands. Not a single person in sight, but floating towards him is—

"Hey, Mr. Lancer. Is everyone okay?"

Phantom hovers about a foot off the ground, scanning the field in the same way Lancer had just

done before turning back to face him. Mr. Lancer blinks. When was the last time Phantom had spoken directly to him? It's certainly been a while, and Lancer's pretty sure it's always been during some sort of emergency.

"Oh! Er. Hello. Yes, everyone is alright as far as I know. I'm just..." He trails off, uncertain how much information the ghost actually wants. This is strange. Phantom usually disappears after a fight. He doesn't stick around after the battle is clearly over and dealt with.

Phantom nods. His feet meet the ground as he stops hovering. He idly pats his hands against his thighs and breaks eye contact, like he doesn't quite know what to do with himself or how to proceed. After another moment, he says, "Are *you* okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Do I not look okay?

"You knew them, didn't you?"

It's said more like a confirmation than a question. Mr. Lancer sighs. Had he really seemed that stricken when he spotted the two ghosts? Maybe he had. His last conversation with Ms. Bronstead had been something about the coffee running out. Later in the day, after the kids had all left, there was a loud *boom* somewhere in the school. Lancer hadn't found out what happened until the next morning, and the school was closed for a couple of days afterwards as the community grieved.

"...yes. They were my coworkers, a long time ago."

"Ouch. Um. I'm sorry."

"I am, too."

More silence. Lancer expects a question about how they died, but it never comes. Phantom shifts his weight. He takes a breath like he's about to speak. Then, he seems to change his mind and just lets the breath escape.

"Do you... not need to be somewhere?" Mr. Lancer asks hesitantly.

Phantom straightens. "Oh! Right. I, uh, should probably head back to class. You did remember to count me in the headcount, right?"

What? Why— did Phantom attend Casper High when he was alive? What could make him possibly think that Lancer included him in the headcount? Before Lancer can ask any questions, however, a glowing white ring appears encircling Phantom's waist as he lands fully on the ground. The ring splits into two, with one going upwards and the other going down. They terminate at his head and feet.

Mr. Lancer screams, clutching at his chest.

Daniel Fenton screams back.

"The Invisible Man! What did you just do?!"

"I transformed?!" Phantom-turned-Fenton, sounding panicked and confused at the same time.

"Transformed? What about Daniel Fenton?! Where is he?"

"What do you mean what about— *I'm* Daniel! I thought you knew!"

"Knew *what?!"*

"Knew that I'm Phantom! Me! Danny Fenton and Phantom are the same!"

"HOW would I have known that?! When would I *ever* have known that?!"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?! I THOUGHT YOU FIGURED IT OUT!"

"YOU NEVER SAID YOU WERE *PHANTOM!"*

"SHHHHH!" Daniel looks around, panicked. He lowers his voice to a whisper when he doesn't see anyone. "I didn't realize I had to *say* I was Phantom! The other day, when we were talking, you were asking me about my 'responsibility' and how long I've been dead for and the accident and junk and I thought we were doing that thing they do in movies where two people are talking about the thing without saying what the thing is, but really they both know exactly what the thing is! You know?"

"No? What kind of nonsense is that?" Now that things have calmed down a bit, Mr. Lancer rubs at where he'd grabbed his shirt. Goodness, that scare caused a *physical* ache. He didn't think that was possible.

"Well that's just plain— nevermind. Wait, so what were you thinking then? Oh." Understanding dawns on his features, and Daniel facepalms. "You... you just thought I was me. That Fenton is the ghost of Fenton."

"I... yes?" Lancer honestly isn't quite sure he followed the question.

"Dang. I really could have just— *dang.* Any chance you can just pretend this didn't happen?"

Lancer is horrified. This entire time, Daniel was Danny Phantom? In hindsight, the kid hadn't even bothered going by a different first name but *What Men Live By*. All the ghost fights. All the town rescues, all the news clips and articles and property damage and *injuries.* The battles get brutal sometimes, and its always been Daniel? How does he even have the energy to come to school? How does he manage to balance it all?

He hasn't been balancing it, Lancer realizes. Not really. He's been really, truly struggling for two years now, and Mr. Lancer finally understands why.

Lancer opens his mouth to respond, but finds he can't say anything. His chest hurts. Badly. This isn't just a scare... something's wrong.

Daniel seems to notice his discomfort, because he straightens like he just got an idea. "Does your chest hurt?"

"Yes, I... something is..."

"Hurts like a heart attack, do ya think?"

"... maybe...?" *The Tell Tale Heart.* Lancer hadn't even considered that possibility. His doctor had warned him, but... oh goodness, his left arm is...

"YES! FINALLY!"

"Finally?" Lancer groans. He needs to sit down. He knew some of his students hated him, but he hadn't considered the possibility of any of them *rejoicing* to the news that he's having a heart attack.

"You won't *believe* how long I've been trying to keep an eye on you in case— wait, I need to call 911, you're having a heart attack, *oh my god."*

On one hand, he and Daniel's conversation from the other day suddenly makes a *whole* lot of sense now, and this was definitely the missing piece of The Fenton Mystery. On the other hand, he is very much in a lot of pain. Despite this, he can't help but chuckle (possibly deliriously) as Daniel helps him sit down before running into the school while on the phone with 911.

Teenagers. They never stop surprising him.

Chapter End Notes

"Teenagers scare the living shit outta me,
They could care less, as long as someone will bleed."

- "Teenagers," My Chemical Romance

Lancer probably would disagree with that. Teenagers are weird, but they're not *scary*. Not even the dead ones. Usually.

—

Alright, y'all. We're out. Man, this feels really weird to be done with this... and don't worry, I'm still responding to comments, I've just experienced a bit of a lag in getting to them. Thank you for everyone that's passed along well-wishes for my family, though! I really appreciate it. :) Video ideas still welcome, because I have some other fics for this series in the works. I'm also gonna probably do something with Blasmaster and The Rule Breaker because they ended up being really fun - thank you to bib and Amabsis from the DP Fanfiction Palace server for the names! :)

For one last little thank you, here's a preview of a WIP that takes place around the same time as Chapter 10 (said preview subject to change as I get closer to posting it, lol):

> Of course Danny is still being a superhero, and of course Mom and Dad haven't found out about it yet. Jazz honestly isn't sure what she was expecting. The ViewTube channel on the other hand... that's newer. Jazz finds it a little harder to believe they haven't found out about that. Even though she knows what her parents are like, even though she knows the sheer amount of things that she and Danny have managed to get past them, she's still surprised.
>
> Logically, when she thinks about it, it kinda makes sense. Last she checked, the ViewTube algorithm isn't invasive enough to recommend videos similar to what your family watches (hopefully). And it's not like her parents use ViewTube for anything other than paranormal science, the occasional viral video, and conspiracy videos about patterns in burnt toast, but... still. Danny is rarely home nowadays! And he's so obviously (still) sneaking out at night! Come on!
>
> Jazz honestly isn't that into parkour or training or any of the other videos

he posts. She watched a couple, but she's ultimately not really interested. Good for him that he has a hobby, she supposes, and it's nice that he's getting positive feedback from other people his age. She kinda wishes that he would have picked something a little less... dangerous? Sure, he's a ghostly superhero or whatever, but she still gets worried. Those people on the internet may be supporting him, but they could just as easily be enabling him to do dangerous stuff... Hmm. Maybe this really *is* a bad idea. She should probably talk to him.

Right as she's deciding that, she sees the cop car out of the window and her brother's mop of hair in the backseat. She sighs. He couldn't have waited for *five minutes* to give her a chance to think about what to say to him?

Preview ends! This would take place immediately after the incident at the lake; Jazz is home for winter break from her freshman year of college, and it's a bit of a retrospective maybe? I'm not sure. It's been in my drafts since around the time I posted Chapter 10 or 11, lol.

EDIT 3/7/2021:

besturlonhere:

> June 7th, 1942: Edward Hopper completes his best known painting, the seminal *Nighthawks*. When asked by a Chicago Tribute reporter about the philosophical meaning behind the diner having no clearly visible exits Hopper responded, “Shit. Fuck. I did it again. Goddamnit. Fuck. Not again. I did it again. Shit.” and slammed his hat on his leg.

ifunny.co

^ I feel like the artist in this post right now, y'all. Like literally. People commented ch 25 or 26 (i think?) with like "Is Lancer gonna die?" and I tried to manipulate the later narrative to assuage these fears, only for me to do the same gosh-danged thing in the final chapter.

Lancer's okay, y'all. He got to the hospital, they treated him, he's fine.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!